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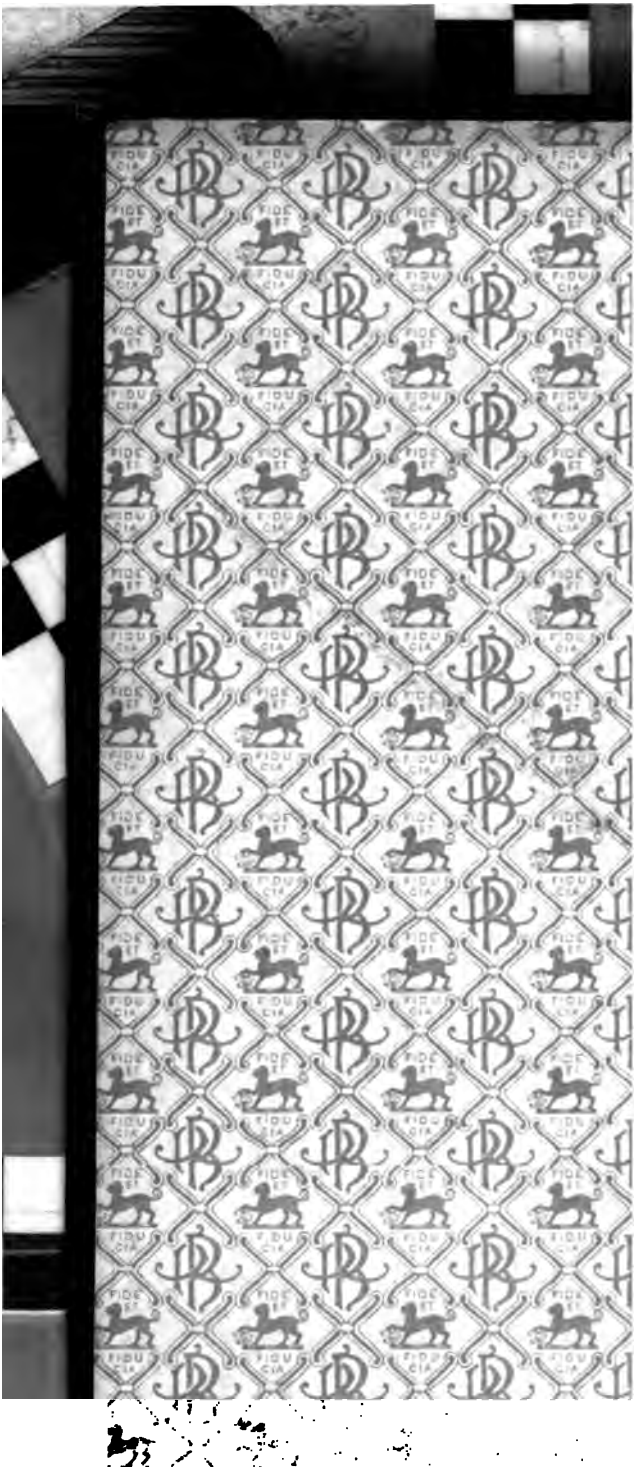

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UNCLE MAX

UNCLE MAX

BY

ROSA NOUCHETTE CAREY

AUTHOR OF

'NELLIE'S MEMORIES,' 'WEE WIFIE,' 'ROBERT ORD'S ATONEMENT,' ETC.

A NEW EDITION

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UNCLE MAX

CHAPTER I

OUT OF THE MIST

It appears to me, looking back over a past experience, that certain days in one's life stand out prominently as landmarks, when we arrive at some finger-post pointing out the road that we should follow.

We come out of some deep, rutty lane, where the hedgerows obscure the prospect, and where the footsteps of some unknown passenger have left tracks in the moist red clay. The confused tracery of green leaves overhead seems to weave fanciful patterns against the dim blue of the sky; the very air is low-pitched and oppressive. All at once we find ourselves in an open space; the free winds of heaven are blowing over us; there are four roads meeting; the finger-post points silently, 'This way to such a place'; we can take our choice, counting the milestones rather wearily as we pass them. The road may be a little tedious, the stones may hurt our feet; but if it be the right road it will bring us to our destination.

In looking back it always seems to me as though I came to a fresh landmark in my experience that November afternoon when I saw Uncle Max standing in the twilight, waiting for me.

There had been the waste of a great trouble in my young life,—sorrow, confusion, then utter chaos. I had struggled on somehow after my twin brother's death, trying to fight against

despair with all my youthful vitality; creating new duties for myself, throwing out fresh feelers everywhere; now and then crying out in my undisciplined way that the task was too hard for me; that I loathed my life; that it was impossible to live any longer without love and appreciation and sympathy; that so uncongenial an atmosphere could be no home to me; that the world was an utter negation and a mockery.

That was before I went to the hospital, at the time when my trouble was fresh and I was breaking my heart with the longing to see Charlie's face again. Most people who have lived long in the world, and have parted with their beloved, know what that sort of hopeless ache means.

My work was over at the hospital, and I had come home again,—to rest, so they said, but in reality to work out plans for my future life, in a sort of sullen silence, that seemed to shut me out from all sympathy.

It had wrapped me in a sort of mantle of reserve all the afternoon, during which I had been driving with Aunt Philippa and Sara. The air would do me good. I was moped, hipped, with all that dreary hospital work, so they said. It would distract and amuse me to watch Sara making her purchases. Reluctance, silent opposition, only whetted their charitable mood.

'Don't be disagreeable, Ursula. You might as well help me choose my new mantle,' Sara had said, quite pleasantly, and I had given in with a bad grace.

Another time I might have been amused by Aunt Philippa's majestic deportment and Sara's brisk importance, her girlish airs and graces; but I was too sad at heart to indulge in my usual satire. Everything seemed stupid and tiresome; the hum of voices wearied me; the showroom at Marshall and Snelgrove's seemed a confused Babel,—everywhere strange voices, a hubbub of sound, tall figures in black passing and repassing, strange faces reflected in endless pier-glasses,—faces of puckered anxiety repeating themselves in ludicrous *vraisemblance*.

I saw our own little group reproduced in one. There was Aunt Philippa, tall and portly, with her well-preserved beauty, a little full-blown perhaps, but still 'marvellously' good-looking for her age, if she could only have not been so conscious of the fact.

Then, Sara, standing there slim and straight, with the furred

mantle just slipping over her smooth shoulders, radiant with good health, good looks, perfectly contented with herself and the whole world, as it behooves a handsome, high-spirited young woman to be with her surroundings, looking bright, unconcerned, good-humoured, in spite of her mother's fussy criticisms: Aunt Philippa was always a little fussy about dress.

Between the two I could just catch a glimpse of myself,—a tall girl, dressed very plainly in black, with a dark complexion, large, anxious-looking eyes, that seemed appealing for relief from all this dulness,—a shadowy sort of image of discontent and protest in the background, hovering behind Aunt Philippa's velvet mantle and Sara's slim supple figure.

'Well, Ursula,' said Sara, still good-humouredly, 'will you not give us your opinion? Does this dolman suit me, or would you prefer a long jacket trimmed with skunk?'

I remember I decided in favour of the jacket, only Aunt Philippa interposed, a little contemptuously,—

'What does Ursula know about the present fashion? She has spent the last year in the wards of St. Thomas's, my dear,' dropping her voice, and taking up her gold-rimmed eye-glasses to inspect me more critically,—a mere habit, for I had reason to know Aunt Philippa was not the least near-sighted. 'I cannot see any occasion for you to dress so dowdily, with three hundred a year to spend absolutely on yourself; for of course poor Charlie's little share has come to you. You could surely make yourself presentable, especially as you know we are going to Hyde Park Mansions to see Lesbia.'

This was too much for my equanimity. 'What does it matter? I am not coming with you, Aunt Philippa,' I retorted, somewhat vexed at this personality; but Sara overheard us, and strove to pour oil on the troubled waters.

'Leave Ursula alone, mother: she looks tolerably well this afternoon; only mourning never suits a dark complexion——' But I did not wait to hear any more. I wandered about the place disconsolately, pretending to examine things with passing curiosity, but my eyes were throbbing and my heart beating angrily at Sara's thoughtless speech. A sudden remembrance seemed to steal before me vividly: Charlie's pale face, with its sad, sweet smile, haunted me. 'Courage, Ursula; it will be over soon.' Those were his last words, poor boy, and he was looking at me and not at Lesbia as he spoke. I always wondered what he meant by them. Was it his long pain, which he had

borne so patiently, that would soon be over? or was it that cruel parting to which he alluded? or did he strive to comfort me at the last with the assurance—alas! for our mortal nature, so sadly true—that pain cannot last for ever, that even faithful sorrow is short-lived and comforts itself in time, that I was young enough to outlive more than one trouble, and that I might take courage from this thought?

I looked down at the black dress, such as I had worn nearly two years for him, and raged as I remembered Sara's flippant words. 'My darling, I would wear mourning for you all my life gladly,' I said, with an inward sob that was more anger than sorrow, 'if I thought you would care for me to do it. Oh, what a world this is, Charlie! surely vanity and vexation of spirit!'

I did not mean to be cross with Sara, but my thoughts had taken a gloomy turn, and I could not recover my spirits: indeed, as we drove down Bond Street, where Sara had some glittering little toy to purchase, I reiterated my intention of not calling at Hyde Park Mansions.

'I do not want any tea,' I said wearily, 'and I would rather go home. Give my love to Lesbia; I will see her another day.'

'Lesbia will be hurt,' remonstrated Sara. 'What a little misanthrope you are, Ursula! St. Thomas's has injured you socially; you have become a hermit-crab all at once, and it is such nonsense at your age.'

'Oh, let me be, Sara!' I pleaded; 'I am tired, and Lesbia always chatters so; and Mrs. Fullerton is worse. Besides, did you not tell me she was coming to dine with us this evening?'

'Yes, to be sure; but she wanted us to meet the Percy Glyns. Mirrel and Winifred Glyn are to be there this afternoon. Never mind, Lesbia will understand when I say you are in one of your ridiculous moods.' And Sara hummed a little tune gaily, as though she meant no offence by her words and was disposed to let me go my own way.

'The carriage can take you home, Ursula; we can walk those few yards,' observed Aunt Philippa, as she descended leisurely, and Sara tripped after her, still humming. But I took no notice of her words: I had had enough dulness and decorum to last me for some time, and the Black Prince and his consort Bay might find their way to their own stables without depositing me at the front door of the house at Hyde Park Gate. I told Clarence so, to his great astonishment, and

walked across the road in an opposite direction to home, as though my feet were winged with quicksilver.

For the Park in that dim November light seemed to allure me; there was a red glow of sunset in the distance; a faint, climbing mist between the trees; the gas-lamps were twinkling everywhere. I could hear the ringing of some church bell; there was space, freedom for thought, a vague, uncertain prospect, out of which figures were looming curiously,—a delightful sense that I was sinning against conventionality and Aunt Philippa.

'Halloo, Ursula!' exclaimed a voice in great astonishment; and there, out of the mist, was a kind face looking at me,—a face with a brown beard, and dark eyes with a touch of amusement in them; and the eyes and the beard and the bright, welcoming smile belonged to Uncle Max.

As I caught at his outstretched hand with a half-stifled exclamation of delight, a policeman turned round and looked at us with an air of interest. No doubt he thought the tall brown-bearded clergyman in the shabby coat—it was one of Uncle Max's peculiarities to wear a shabby coat occasionally—was the sweetheart of the young lady in black. Uncle Max—I am afraid I oftener called him Max—was only a few years older than myself, and had occupied the position of an elder brother to me.

He was my poor mother's only brother, and had been dearly loved by her,—not as I had loved Charlie, perhaps; but they had been much to each other, and he had always seemed nearer to me than Aunt Philippa, who was my father's sister; perhaps because there was nothing in common between us, and I had always been devoted to Uncle Max.

'Well, Ursula,' he said, pretending to look grave, but evidently far too pleased to see me to give me a very severe lecture, 'what is the meaning of this? Does Mrs. Garston allow young ladies under her charge to stroll about Hyde Park in the twilight? or have you stolen a march on her, naughty little she-bear?'

I drew my hand away with an offended air: when Uncle Max wished to tease or punish me he always reminded me that the name of Ursula signified she-bear, and would sometimes call me 'the little black growler'; and at such times it was provoking to think that Sara signified princess. I have always wondered how far and how strongly our baptismal names

influence us. Of course he would not let me walk beside him in that dignified manner: the next instant I heard his clear hearty laugh, and then I laughed too.

'What an absurd child you are! I was thinking over your letter as I walked along. It did not bring me to London, certainly; I had business of my own; but, all the same, I have walked across the Park this evening to talk to you about this extraordinary scheme.'

But I would not let him go on. He was about to cross the road, so I took his arm and turned him back. And there was the gray mist creeping up between the trees, and the lamps glimmering in the distance, and the faint pink glow had not yet died away.

'It is so quiet here,' I pleaded, 'and I could not get you alone for a moment if we went in. Uncle Brian will be there, and Jill, and we could not say a word. Aunt Philippa and Sara have gone to see Lesbia. I have been driving with them all the afternoon. Sara has been shopping, and how bored I was!'

'You uncivilised little heathen!' Then, very gravely, 'Well, how is poor Lesbia?'

'Do not waste your pity on her,' I returned impatiently. 'She is as well and cheerful as possible. Even Sara says so. She is not breaking her heart about Charlie. She has left off mourning, and is as gay as ever.'

'You are always hard on Lesbia,' he returned gently. 'She is young, my dear, you forget that, and a pretty girl, and very much admired. It always seems to me she was very fond of the poor fellow.'

'She was good to him in his illness, but she never cared for Charlie as he did for her. He worshipped the very ground she walked on. He thought her perfection. Uncle Max, it was pitiful to hear him sometimes. He would tell me how sweet and unselfish she was, and all the time I knew she was but an ordinary, commonplace girl. If he had lived to marry her he would have been disappointed in her. He was so large-hearted, and Lesbia has such little aims.'

'So you always say, Ursula. But you women are so severe in your judgment of each other. I doubt myself if the girl lives whom you would have considered good enough for Charlie. Yes, yes, my dear,'—as I uttered a dissenting protest to this,—'he was a fine fellow, and his was a most lovable character; but it was his last illness that ripened him.'

'He was always perfect in my eyes,' I returned, in a choked voice.

'That was because you loved him; and no doubt Lesbia possessed the same ideal goodness for him. Love throws its own glamour,' he went on, and his voice was unusually grave; 'it does not believe in commonplace mediocrity; it lifts up its idol to some fanciful pedestal, where the poor thing feels very uncomfortable and out of its element, and then persists in falling down and worshipping it. We humans are very droll, Ursula: we will create our own divinities.'

'Lesbia would have disappointed him,' I persisted obstinately; but I might as well have talked to the wind. Uncle Max could not find it in his heart to be hard to a pretty girl.

'That is open to doubt, my dear. Lesbia is amiable and charming, and I daresay she would have made a nice little wife. Poor Charlie hated clever women, and in that respect she would have suited him.'

After this I knew it was no good in trying to change his opinion. Uncle Max held his own views with remarkable tenacity; he had old-fashioned notions with respect to women, rather singular in so young a man,—for he was only thirty; he preferred to believe in their goodness, in spite of any amount of demonstration to the contrary; it vexed him to be reminded of the shortcomings of his friends; by nature he was an optimist, and had a large amount of faith in people's good intentions. 'He meant well, poor fellow, in spite of his failures,' was a speech I have heard more than once from his lips. He was always ready to condone a fault or heal a breach; indeed, his sweet nature found it difficult to bear a grudge against any one; he was only hard to himself, and on no one else did he strive to impose so heavy a yoke. I was only silent for a minute, and then I turned the conversation into another channel.

'But my letter, Uncle Max!'

'Ah, true, your letter; but I have not forgotten it. How old are you, Ursula? I always forget.'

'Five-and-twenty this month.'

'To be sure; I ought to have remembered. And you have three hundred a year of your own.'

I nodded.

'And your present home is distasteful to you?' in an inquiring tone.

'It is no home to me,' I returned passionately. 'Oh, Uncle

Max, how can one call it home after the dear old rectory, where we were so happy, father, and mother, and Charlie—and——'

'Yes, I know, poor child; and you have had heavy troubles. It cannot be like the old home, I am well aware of that, Ursula; but your aunt is a good woman. I have always found her strictly just. She was your father's only sister: when she offered you a home she promised to treat you with every indulgence, as though you were her own daughter.'

'Aunt Philippa means to be kind,' I said, struggling to repress my tears,—tears always troubled Uncle Max: 'she is kind in her way, and so is Sara. I have every comfort, every luxury; they want me to be gay and enjoy myself, to lead their life; but it only makes me miserable; they do not understand me; they see I do not think with them, and then they laugh at me and call me morbid. No one really wants me but poor Jill: I am so fond of Jill.'

'Why cannot you lead their life, Ursula?'

'Because it is not life at all,' was my resolute answer: 'to me it is the most wearisome existence possible. Listen to me, Uncle Max. Do you think I could possibly spend my days as Sara does,—writing a few notes, doing a little fancy-work, shopping and paying visits, and dancing half the night? Do you think you could transform such a poor little Cinderella into a fairy princess, like Sara or Lesbia? No; the drudgery of such a life would kill me with *ennui* and discontent.'

'It is not the life I would choose for you, certainly,' he said, pulling his beard in some perplexity: 'it is far too worldly to suit my taste; if Charlie had lived you would have made your home with him. He often talked to me about that, poor fellow. I thought a year or two at Hyde Park Gate would do you no harm, and might be wholesome training; but it has proved a failure, I see that.'

'They would be happier without me,' I went on, more quietly, for he was evidently coming round to my view of the case. 'Aunt Philippa does not mean to be unkind, but she often lets me see that I am in the way, that she is not proud of me. She would have taken more interest in me if I had been handsome, like Sara; but a plain, dowdy niece is not to her taste. No, let me finish, Uncle Max,'—for he wanted to interrupt me here. 'They made a great fuss about my training at the hospital last year, but I am sure they did not miss me; Sara spoke yesterday as though she thought I was going

back to St. Thomas's, and Aunt Philippa made no objection. I heard her tell Mrs. Fullerton once "that really Ursula was so strong-minded and different from other girls that she was prepared for anything, even for her being a female doctor."'

'Well, my dear, you are certainly rather peculiar, you know.'

'Oh, Uncle Max,' I said mournfully, 'are you going to misunderstand me too? Providence has deprived me of my parents and my only brother: is it strong-minded or peculiar to be so lonely and sad at heart that gaiety only jars on me? Can I forget my mother's teaching when she said, "Ursula, if you live for the world you will be miserable. Try to do your duty and benefit your fellow-creatures, and happiness must follow"?'

'Yes, poor Emmie, she was a good woman: you might do worse than take after her.'

'She would not approve of the life I am leading at Hyde Park Gate,' I went on. 'She and Aunt Philippa never cared for each other. I often think that if she had known she would not have liked me to be there. Sundays are wretched. We go to church?—yes, because it is respectable to do so; but there is a sort of reunion every Sunday evening.'

'I wish I could offer you a home, Ursula; but——' here Uncle Max hesitated.

'That would not do at all,' I returned promptly. 'Your bachelor home would not do for me; besides, you might marry —of course you will,' but he flushed rather uncomfortably at that, and said, 'Pshaw! what nonsense!' We had paused under a lamp-post, and I could see him plainly: perhaps he knew this, for he hurried me on, this time in the direction of home.

'I am five-and-twenty,' I continued, trying to collect the salient points of my argument. "I am indebted to none for my maintenance; I am free, and my own mistress; I neglect no duty by refusing to live under Uncle Brian's roof; no one wants me; I contribute to no one's happiness.'

'Except to Jill's,' observed Uncle Max.

'Jill! but she is only a child, barely sixteen, and Sara is becoming jealous of my influence. I shall only breed dissension in the household if I remain. Uncle Max, you are a good man, —a clergyman; you cannot conscientiously tell me that I am not free to lead my own life, to choose my own work in the world.'

'Perhaps not,' he replied, in a hesitating voice. 'But the scheme is a peculiar one. You wish me to find respectable lodgings in my parish, where you will be independent and free from supervision, and to place your superfluous health and strength—you are a muscular Christian, Ursula—at the service of my sick poor, and for this post you have previously trained yourself.'

'I think it will be a good sort of life,' I returned carelessly, but how my heart was beating! 'I like it so much, and I should like to be near you, Uncle Max, and work under you as my vicar. I have thought about this for years. Charlie and I often talked of it. I was to live with him and Lesbia and devote my time to this work. He thought it such a nice idea to go and nurse poor people in their homes. And he promised that he would come and sing to them. But now I must carry out my plan alone, for Charlie cannot help me now.' And as I thought of the sympathy that had never failed me my voice quivered and I could say no more.

'I wish we were all in heaven,' growled Uncle Max,—but his tone was a little husky,—'for this world is a most uncomfortable place for good people, or people with a craze. I think Charlie is well out of it.'

'Under which category do you mean to place me?' I asked, trying to laugh.

'My dear, there is a craze in most women. They have such an obstinate faith in their own good intentions. If they find half a dozen fools to believe in them, they will start a crusade to found a new Utopia. Women are the most meddlesome things in creation: they never let well alone. Their pretty little fingers are in every human pie. That is why we get so much unwholesome crust and so little meat, and, of course, our digestion is ruined.'

'Uncle Max——' But he would not be serious any longer.

'Ursula, I utterly refuse to inhale any more of this mist. I think a comfortable arm-chair by the fire would be far more conducive to comfort. You have given me plenty of food for thought, and I mean to sleep on it. Now, not another word. I am going to ring the bell.' And Uncle Max was as good as his word.

CHAPTER II

BEHIND THE BARS

It was quite true, as I had told Uncle Max, that the scheme had been no new one; it was no sudden emanation from a girl's brain, morbid with discontent and fruitless longings; it had grown with my youth and had become part of my environment. As a child the thought had come to me as I followed my father into one cottage after another in his house-to-house visitation. He had been a conscientious, hard-working clergyman; in fact, his work killed him, for he overtasked a constitution that was not naturally strong. I accompanied my mother, too, in her errands of mercy, and saw a great deal of the misery engendered by drink, ignorance, and want of forethought. In the case of the sick poor, the gross mismanagement and want of cleanly and thrifty habits led to an amount of discomfort and suffering that even now makes me shudder. The parish was overgrown and insufficiently worked; the greater part of the population belonged to the working-classes; dissenting chapels and gin-palaces flourished. Often did my childish heart ache at the surroundings of some squalid home, where the parents toiled all day for worse than naught, just to satisfy their unhealthy cravings, while the children grew up riotous, half starved, and full of inherited vices. There was a little child I saw once, a cripple, dying slowly of some sad spinal disease, lying in a dark corner, on what seemed to me a heap of rags. Oh, God, I can see that child's face now! I remember when we heard of its death my mother burst into tears. They were tears of joy, she told me afterwards, that another suffering child's life was ended; 'and there are

hundreds and hundreds of these little creatures, Ursula,' she said, 'growing up in sin and misery; and the world goes on, and people eat and drink and are merry, for it is none of their business, and yet it is not the will of the Father that one of these little ones should perish.'

I had learned much from my father, but still more from my mother. Uncle Max had called her a good woman, but she was more than that: she possessed one of those rare unselfish natures that cannot remain satisfied with their own personal happiness: they wish to include the whole world. She wanted to inculcate in me her own spirit of self-sacrifice. I can remember some of her short, trenchant sentences now.

'Never mind happiness: that is God's gift to a few: do your duty.'

'If you have loved your fellow-creatures sufficiently you will not be afraid to die. A good conscience will smooth your pillow.'

And once, in her last illness, when Charlie asked if she were comfortable, 'Not very, but I shall soon be quite comfortable, for I shall hope to forget in heaven how little I have done, after all, here; and yet I always wanted to help others.'

Oh, how good she was! And Charlie was good too, after the fashion of young men: not altogether thoughtless, full of the promptings of his kind heart; but Uncle Max was right when he said his last illness had ripened him: it was not the old careless Charlie who had wooed Lesbia who lay there: it was another and a better Charlie.

In the old days he had rallied me in a brotherly manner on my old-fashioned, grave ways. 'You are not a modern young lady, Ursie,' he would say; and he would often call me 'grandmother Ursula'; but all the same he would listen to my plans with the utmost tolerance and good nature.

Ah, those talks in the twilight, before the fatal disease developed itself, and he lay in idle fashion on the couch with his arms under his head, while I sat on the footstool or on the rug in the firelight! We were to live together,—yes, that was always the dream; even when Lesbia's fair face came between us he would not hear of any difference. I was to live with him and Lesbia. Lesbia was rich, and, though Charlie had little, they were to marry soon.

I was to form a part of that luxurious household, but my time was to be my own, and I was to devote it to the sick poor

of Rutherford. 'Mind, Ursula, you may work, but I will not have you overwork,' Charlie had once said, more decidedly than usual; 'you must come home for hours of rest and refreshment. You have a beautiful voice, and it shall be properly trained; you may sing to your invalids as much as you like, and sometimes I will come and sing too; but you must remember you have social duties, and I shall expect you to entertain our friends.' And it was the idea of this dual life of home sympathy and outside work that had so strongly seized upon my imagination.

When Charlie died I was too sick at heart to carry out my plan. 'How can one work alone?' I would say sorrowfully to myself; but after a time the emptiness of my life and dissatisfaction with my surroundings brought back the old thoughts.

I remembered the dear old rectory life, where every one was in earnest, and contrasted it with the trifling pursuits that my aunt and cousin called duties. My present existence seemed to shut me in like prison bars. Only to be free, to choose my own life! And then came emancipation in the shape of hard hospital work, when health and spirits returned to me; when, under the stimulus of useful employment and constant exercise of body and mind, I slept better, fretted less, and looked less mournfully out on the world. Uncle Max was right when he said a year at St. Thomas's would save me.

By and by the idea dawned upon me that I might still carry out my plan; there were poor people at Heathfield, where Uncle Max's parish was. What should hinder me from living there under Uncle Max's wing and trying to combine the two lives, as Charlie wished?

I was young, full of activity. I did not wish to shut myself out from my kind. I could discharge my duties to my own class and enjoy a moderate amount of pleasure. I was young enough to desire that; but the greater part of my time would be placed at the disposal of my poorer neighbours. People might think it singular at first, but they would not talk for ever, and the life would be a happy one to me.

All this had been said in that voluminous letter of mine to Uncle Max; he might argue and shake his head over it, thereby proving himself a wise man, but he could not but know that I was absolutely under my own control, as far as a woman could be. I need ask no one's advice in the disposal of my own life; his own and Uncle Brian's guardianship was merely

nominal now. After five-and-twenty I was declared my own mistress in every sense of the word.

Uncle Brian came out to meet us as soon as he heard Uncle Max's voice in the hall; the two were very great friends, and they shook hands cordially.

'Glad to see you, Cunliffe; why did you not let us know that you were coming up to town? We could have put you up easily—eh, Ursula?'

'Yes, indeed, Uncle Brian'; and then I added coaxingly, 'Do please send for your portmanteau, Uncle Max; you know Lesbia is coming this evening, and you are such a favourite with her.' I knew this would be a strong inducement, for Uncle Max's soft heart would insist on treating Lesbia as though she were a widowed princess.

'All right,' he returned in his lazy way, and then I took the matter into my own hands by leaving the room at once to consult with Mrs. Martin, Aunt Philippa's housekeeper. As I closed the door I glanced back for another look at Uncle Max. He had thrown himself into an easy-chair, as though he were tired, and was leaning back with his hands under his head in Charlie's fashion, looking up at Uncle Brian, who was standing on the rug.

I always thought Uncle Brian a very handsome man. He had clear, well-cut features and a gray moustache, and he was quiet and dignified. He always looked to me, with his brown complexion, more like an Indian officer than a wealthy banker. There was nothing commercial in his appearance; but I should have admired him more if he had been less cold and repressive in manner; but he was an undemonstrative man, even to his own children.

I remember hinting this once to Uncle Max, and he had rebuked me more severely than he had ever done before.

'I do not like young girls like you, Ursula, to be so critical about their elders. Garston is an excellent fellow; he has plenty of brains, and always does the right thing, however difficult it may be. Men are not like women, my dear: they often hide their deepest feelings. Your poor uncle has never been quite the same man since Ralph's death, and just as he was getting over his boy's loss a little he had a fresh disappointment with Charlie: he always meant to put him in Ralph's place.'

I was a little ashamed of my criticism when Max said this.

I felt I had not made sufficient allowance for Uncle Brian: the death of his only son must have been a dreadful blow. Ralph had died at Oxford; they said he had overworked himself in trying for honours and then had taken a chill. He was a fine, handsome young fellow, nearly two-and-twenty, and his father's idol: no wonder Uncle Brian had grown so much older and graver during the last few years.

And he had been fond of Charlie, and had meant to have him in Ralph's place; my poor boy would have been a rich one if he had lived. Uncle Brian had taken him into the bank, and Lesbia and her fortune were promised to him, but the goodly heritage was snatched away before his eyes, and he was called away in the fresh bloom of his youth.

I always thought Uncle Brian liked Max better than any other man: he was always less stiff and frigid in his presence. I could hear his low laugh—Uncle Brian never laughed loudly—as I closed the door; Max had said something that amused him. They would be quite happy without me, so I ran up to the schoolroom on the chance of getting a chat with Jill.

The schoolroom was on the second floor, where Jill, I, and Fräulein all slept. Sara had a handsome room next to her mother's, and a little boudoir furnished most daintily for her special use. I do not believe she ever sat in it, unless she had a cold or was otherwise ailing; the drawing-room was always full of company, and Sara was the life of the house. I used to peep in at the pretty room sometimes as I went up to bed; there were few notes written at the inlaid escritoire, and the handsomely-bound books were never taken down from the shelves. Draper, Aunt Philippa's maid, fed the canaries and dusted the cabinets of china. Sometimes Sara would trip into the room with one of her cronies for a special chat; the ripple of their girlish laughter would reach us as Jill and I sat together. 'Whom has Sara got with her this afternoon?' Jill would say peevishly. 'Do listen to them; they do nothing but laugh. If Fräulein had set her all these exercises she would not feel quite so merry,' Jill would finish, throwing the obnoxious book from her with a little burst of impatience.

I always pitied Jill for having to spend her days in such a dull room; the furniture was ugly, and the windows looked out on a dismal back-yard, with the high walls of the opposite building. Aunt Philippa, who was a rigid disciplinarian with her young daughter, always said that she had chosen the room

'because Jill would have nothing to distract her from her studies.' The poor child would put up her shoulders at this remark and draw down the corners of her lips in a way that would make Aunt Philippa scold her for her awkwardness. 'You need not make yourself plainer than you are, Jocelyn,' she would say severely; for Jill's awkward manners troubled her motherly vanity. 'What is the good of all the dancing and drilling and riding with Captain Cooper if you will persist in hunching your shoulders as though you were deformed? Fräulein has been complaining of you this morning; she seems excessively displeased at your carelessness and want of application.' 'I know I shall get stupid, shut up in that dull hole with Fräulein,' Jill would say passionately, after one of these maternal lectures. Aunt Philippa was really very fond of Jill; but she misunderstood the girl's nature. The system had answered so well with Sara that she could not be brought to comprehend why it should fail with her other child. Sara had grown up blooming and radiant in spite of the depressing influences of Fräulein and the dull, narrow schoolroom. Her music and singing masters had come to her there. Little Madame Blanchard had chirped to her in Parisian accent for the hour together over *les modes* and *le beau Paris*. Sara had danced and drilled with the other young ladies at Miss Dugald's select establishment, and had joined them at the riding-school or in the cavalcade under Captain Cooper.

Sara had worn her bondage lightly, and had fascinated even grim old Herr Schliefer. Her tact and easy adaptability had kept Fräulein Sonnenschein in a state of tepid good-humour. Every one, even cross old Draper, idolised Sara for her beauty and sprightly ways. When Aunt Philippa declared her education finished, she tripped out of the schoolroom as happily as possible to take possession of her grand new bedroom and the little boudoir, where all her girlish treasures were arranged. She had not been the least impatient for her day of freedom: it would all come in good time. When the sceptre was put into her hands and her sovereignty acknowledged by the whole household, the young princess was not a bit excited. She put on her court dress and made her courtesy to her majesty with the same charming unconsciousness and ease of manner. No wonder people were charmed with such good-humour and freshness. If the glossy hair did not cover a large amount of brains, no one found fault with her for that.

Jill raged and stormed fiercely under Sara's light-hearted philosophy; when her sister told her to be patient under Fräulein's yoke, that a good time was coming for her also, when lesson-books would be shut up, and Herr Schliefer would cease to scatter snuff on the carpet as he sat drumming with his fingers on the keyboard and grunting out brief interjections of impatience.

'What does it matter about Herr Schliefer?' Jill would say, in a sort of fury. 'I like him a hundred times better than I do that mincing little poll-parrot of a Madame Blanchard: she is odious, and I hate her, and I hate Fräulein too. It is not the lessons I mind; one has to learn lessons all one's life; it is being shut up like a bird in a cage when one's wings are ready for flight. I should like to fly away from this room, from Fräulein, from the whole of the horrid set; it makes me cross, wicked, to live like this, and all your sugar-plums will do me no good. Go away, Sara; you do not understand as Ursula does. It makes me feel bad to see you standing there, looking so pretty and happy, and just laughing at me.'

'Of course I laugh at you, Jocelyn, when you behave like a baby,' returned Sara, trying to be severe, only her dimples betrayed her. 'Well, as you are so cross, I shall go away. There is the chocolate I promised you. Ta-ta.' And Sara put down the *bonbonnière* on the table and walked out of the room.

I was not surprised to see Jill push it away. No one understood the poor child but myself; she was precocious, womanly, for her age; she had twenty times the amount of brains that Sara possessed, and she was starving on the education provided for her.

To dance and drill and write dreary German exercises, when one is thirsting to drink deeply at the well of knowledge; to go round and round the narrow monotonous course that had sufficed for Sara's moderate abilities, like the blind horse at the mill, and never to advance an inch out of the beaten track,—this was simply maddening to Jill's sturdy intellect. She often told me how she longed to attend classes, to hear lectures, to rub against full-grown minds.

'Now, Me-ess Jocelyn, we will do a little of ze Wallenstein, by the immortal Schiller. Hold up the head, and leave off striking the table with your elbows.' Jill would give a droll imitation of Fräulein, and end with a groan.

'What does she know about Schiller? She cannot even comprehend him. She is dense,—utterly dense and stupid; but because she knows her own language and has a correct

deportment she is fit to teach me.' And Jill ground her little white teeth in impotent wrath. Jill always appeared to me like an infant Pegasus in harness; she wanted to soar,—to make use of her wings,—and they kept her down. She was not naturally gay, like Sara, though her health was good, and she was as powerful as a young Amazon. Her nature was more sombre and took colour from her surroundings.

She was like a child in the sunshine; plenty of life and movement distracted her from interior broodings and made her joyous; when she was riding with the young ladies from Miss Dugald's, she would be as merry as the others.

But her dreary schoolroom and Fräulein's society chafed her nervous sensibilities dangerously; there were only a few brown sparrows, or a stray cat intent on game, to be seen from her window. From the drawing-room, from Sara's boudoir, from her mother's bedroom, there was a charming view of the Park. In the spring the fresh foliage of the trees, and the velvety softness of the grass, would be delicious; down in the broad white road, carriages were passing, horses cantering, happy-looking people in smart bonnets, in gorgeous mantles, driving about everywhere; children would be running up and down the paths in the Park, flower-sellers would stand offering their innocent wares to the passengers. Jill would sit entranced by her mother's window watching them; the sunshine, the glitter, the hubbub, intoxicated her; she made up stories by the dozen, as her dark eyes followed the gay equipages. When Fräulein summoned her she went away reluctantly; the stories got into her head, and stopped there all the time she laboured through that long sonata.

'Why are your fingers all thumbs to-day, Fräulein?' Herr Schliefer would demand gloomily. Jill, who was really fond of the stern old professor, hung her head and blushed guiltily. She had no excuse to offer: her girlish dreams were sacred to her; they came gliding to her through the most intricate passages of the sonata, now with a *staccato* movement,—brisk, lively,—with fitful energy, now *andante*, then *crescendo, con passione*. Jill's unformed girlish hands strike the chords wildly, angrily. '*Dolce, dolce,*' screams the professor in her ears. The music softens, wanes, and the dreams seem to die away too. 'That will do, Fräulein: you have not acquitted yourself so badly after all.' And Jill gets off her music-stool reluctant, absent, half awake, and her day-dream broken up into chaos.

CHAPTER III

CINDERELLA

As I opened the schoolroom door a half-forgotten picture of Cinderella came vividly before me.

The fire had burnt low; a heap of black ashes lay under the grate; and by the dull red glow I could see Jill's forlorn figure, very indistinctly, as she sat in her favourite attitude on the rug, her arms clasping her knees and her short black locks hanging loosely over her shoulders. She gave a little shrill exclamation of pleasure when she saw me.

'Ah, you dear darling bear, do come and hug me,' she cried, trying to get up in a hurry, but her dress entangled her.

'Where is Fräulein?' I asked, pushing her back into her place, while I knelt down to manipulate the miserable fire. 'Jill, you look just like Cinderella when the proud sisters drove away to the ball. My dear, were you asleep? Why are you sitting in the dark, with the fire going out, and the lamp unlighted? There, it only wanted to be stirred; we shall have light by which to see other's faces directly.'

'Fräulein has a headache and has gone to lie down,' returned Jill, and, though I could not see her clearly, I knew at once by her voice that she had been crying; only she would have been furious if I had noticed the fact. 'I hope I am not very wicked, but Fräulein's headaches are the redeeming points in her character; she has them so often, and then she is obliged to lie down.'

'Of course you have offered to bathe her head?' I asked, a little mischievously, but Jill, who was unusually subdued, took the question in good part.

'Oh yes, and I spoke to her quite civilly; but I suppose she saw the savage gleam of delight in my eyes, for she was as cross as possible, and went away muttering that "Meess Jocelyn had the heart like the flint; if it had been Meess Sara, now——" and then she banged the door, so the pain could not have been so bad after all. It is my belief,' went on Jill, 'that Fräulein always has a headache when she has a novel to finish. Mamma does not like her to set me an example of novel-reading, so she is obliged to lock herself in her own room.'

I took no notice of this statement, as I rather leaned to this view of the subject myself. Fräulein's round placid face and excellent appetite showed no signs of suffering, and her constant plea of a bad headache was only received with any credulity by Aunt Philippa herself; neither Sara nor I had much respect for Fräulein Sonnenschein, with her thick little figure, and big head covered with flimsy flaxen plaits. We were both aware of the smooth selfishness of her character, though Sara chose to ignore it for Jill's benefit. She was industrious, painstaking, and capable of a great deal of dull routine in the way of duties, but she was far too fond of her own comfort, and all the affection of which she was capable was lavished upon her own relatives; she had cared for Sara moderately, but her other pupil, Jill, was a thorn in her side. So I passed over Fräulein's headache without comment, and took Jill to task somewhat sharply for the comfortless state of the room. A good scolding would rouse her from her dejection; the blinds were up and the curtains undrawn; the remains of a meal, the usual five-o'clock schoolroom tea, were still on the table. Jill's German books were heaped up beside her empty cup and the glass dish that contained marmalade; the kettle spluttered and hissed in the blaze; Jill's little black kitten, Sooty, was dragging a half-knitted stocking across the rug.

'I forgot to ring for Martha,' faltered Jill; 'she will come presently. Don't be cross, Ursula. I like the room as it is; it is deliciously untidy, just like Cinderella's kitchen; but there is no hope of the fairy godmother; and you are going away, and I shall be ten times more miserable.'

It was this that was troubling her, then; for I had told her my plans and all about my letter to Uncle Max. Perhaps she had heard his voice in the hall, for Jill's pretty little ears heard everything that went on in the house: she admitted her knowledge at once when I taxed her with it.

'Oh yes, I know Mr. Cunliffe is here. I heard papa go out and speak to him; his voice sounded quite cheerful; and now he has come and it will all be settled; and you will go away and be happy with your poor people, and forget that I am fretting myself to death in this horrid room.'

She had drawn me down on the rug forcibly,—for she had the strength of a young Titaness,—and was wrapping her arms around me with a sort of fierce impatience. Her big eyes looked troubled and affectionate. Few people admired Jill; she was undeveloped and awkward, full of angles, and a little brusque in manner; she had a way of thrusting out her big feet and squaring her shoulders that horrified Aunt Philippa. She was very big, certainly, and would never possess Sara's slim grace. Her hair had been cropped in some illness, and had not grown so fast as they expected, but hung in short thick lengths about her neck; it was always getting into her eyes, and was being pushed back impatiently, but she would much oftener throw her head back with a fling like an unbroken pony, for she was jerky as young things often are.

But, though people found fault with Jill, and often said that she would never be as handsome as Sara, I liked her face. Perhaps it was a little irregular and her complexion slightly sallow, but when she was flushed or excited and she opened her big bright eyes, and one could see her little white teeth gleaming as she laughed, I have thought Jill could look almost beautiful; but her good looks depended on her expression.

'I suppose it will be settled,' I replied, with a quick catch at my breath, for the mere mention of the subject excited me; 'but you will be a good child and not fret if I do go away. No, I shall never forget you,' as a close hug answered me; 'I love you too dearly for that; but I want you to be brave about it, dear, for I cannot be happy wasting my time and doing nothing. You know how ill I was before I went to St. Thomas's, so that Uncle Max was obliged to tell Aunt Philippa that I must have change and hard work, or I should follow Charlie.'

'Oh yes, and we were all so frightened about you, you poor thing; you looked so pinched and miserable. Well, I suppose I must let you go, as you are so wicked as to disobey the proverb that "Charity begins at home."'

'Listen to me, dear,' I returned, quite pleased to find her so reasonable. 'I am very glad to know that I have been a comfort to you, but I shall hope to be so still. I will write long

letters to you, Jill, and tell you all about my work, and you shall answer them, and talk to me on paper about the books you have read, and the queer thoughts you have, and how patient and strong you have grown, and how you have learned to put up with Fräulein's little ways and not aggravate her with your untidiness.' And here Jill's hand—and it was by no means a small hand—closed my lips rather abruptly. But I was used to this sort of sledge-hammer form of argument.

'Oh, it is all very fine for you to sit there and moralise, Ursula, like a sort of sucking Diogenes,' grumbled Jill, 'when you know you are going to have your own way and live a deliciously sort of three-volume-novel life, not like any one else's, unless it were Don Quixote, or one of the Knights of the Round Table, poking about among a lot of strange people, doing wonderful things for them, until they are all ready to worship you. It is all very well for you, I say; but what would you do if you were me?' cried Jill, in her shrill treble, and quite oblivious of grammatical niceties; 'how would you like to be poor me, shut up here with that old dragon?'

This was a grand opportunity for airing my philosophy, and I rushed at it. To Jill's amazement, I shook my hair back in the way she usually shook her rough black mane, and, opening my eyes very widely, tried to copy Jill's falsetto.

'How thankful I am Jocelyn Garston and not Ursula Garston,' I said, with rapid staccato. 'Poor Ursula! I am fond of her, but I would not change places with her for the world. She has known such a lot of trouble in her life, more than most girls, I believe; she has lost her lovely home,—such a sweet old place,—and her mother and father and Charlie, all her nearest and her most beloved, and she is so sad that she wants to work hard and forget her troubles.'

'Oh dear!' sighed Jill at this.

'How happy I am compared with her!' I went on, relapsing unconsciously into my own voice. 'I am young and strong; I have all my life before me. True, poor Ralph has gone, but I was only a child, and did not miss him. I have a good father and an indulgent mother' ('Humph!' observed Jill at this point, only she turned it into a cough); 'if my present schoolroom life is not to my taste, I am sensible enough to know that the drudgery and restraint will not last for long; in another year, or a year and a half, Fräulein, whom I certainly do not love, will go back to her own country. I shall be free to read

the books I like, to study what I choose, or to be idle. I shall have Sara's cheerful companionship instead of Fräulein's heavy company; I shall ride; I shall walk in the sunshine; I shall be a butterfly instead of a chrysalis; and if I care to be useful, all sorts of paths will be open to me.'

'There, hold your tongue,' interrupted Jill, with a rough kiss; 'of course I know I am a wicked, ungrateful wretch, and that I ought to be more patient. Yes, you shall go, Ursula; you are a darling, but I will not want to keep you; you are too good to be wasted on me; it would be like pouring gold into a sieve. Well, I did cry about it this afternoon, but I won't be such a goose any more. I will live my life the same way, in spite of all of them, you will see if I don't, Ursula. Who is it who says, "The thoughts of youth are long long thoughts"? I have such big thoughts sometimes, especially when I sit in the dark. I send them out like strange birds, all over the world,—up, up, everywhere,—but they never come back to me again,' finished Jill mournfully; 'if they build nests I never know it: I just sit and puzzle out things, like poor little grimy Cinderella.'

Jill's eloquence did not surprise me. I knew she was very clever, and full of unfledged poetry, and I had often heard her talk in that way; but I had no time to answer her, for just then the first gong sounded, and I could hear Sara running up to her room to dress for dinner. Jill jumped up, and tugged at the bell-rope rather fiercely.

'Martha must have forgotten all about the tea-things; very likely the lamp is smoky and will have to be trimmed. I must not come and help you, Ursie dear, for I have to learn my German poetry before I dress.' And Jill pulled down the blinds and drew the curtains with a vigorous hand. Martha looked quite frightened at the sight of Jill's energy and her own remissness.

'Why did you not ring before, Miss Jocelyn?' she said, plaintively, and in rather an injured voice, as she carried away the tea-tray.

Uncle Max passed me in the passage; Clarence was following with his portmanteau; he looked surprised to see me still in my bonnet with my fur cape trailing over one arm; but I nodded to him cheerfully and went quickly into my room.

My life at St. Thomas's had inured me to hardness; it had contrasted strangely with my luxurious surroundings at Hyde

Park Gate. Aunt Philippa certainly treated me well in her way. I had a full share of the loaves and the fishes of the household; my room was as prettily furnished as Jill's; a bright fire burnt in the grate; there were pink candles on the dressing-table. Martha, who waited upon us both, had put out my black evening dress on the bed, and had warmed my dressing-gown; she would come to me by and by with a civil offer of help.

I was rather puzzled at the sight of a little breast-knot of white chrysanthemums that lay on the table, until I remembered Uncle Max; no one had ever brought me flowers since Charlie's death; he had gathered the last that I ever wore—some white violets that grew in a little hollow in the ground of Rutherford Lodge. I hesitated painfully before I pinned the modest little bouquet in my black dress, but I feared Uncle Max would be hurt if I failed to appear in it. I wore mother's pearl necklace as usual, and the little locket with her hair; somehow I took more pleasure in dressing myself this evening, when I knew Uncle Max's kind eyes would be on me.

I had not hurried myself, and the second gong sounded before I reached the drawing-room, so I came face to face with Lesbia, who was coming out on Uncle Brian's arm. She kissed me in her quiet way, and said, 'How do you do, Ursula?' just as though we had met yesterday, and passed on.

I thought she looked prettier than ever that evening—like a snow princess, in her white gown, with a little fleecy shawl drawn round her shoulders, for she took cold easily. She had a soft creamy complexion, and fair hair that she wore piled up in smooth plaits on her head; she had plaintive blue eyes that could be brilliant at times, and a lovely mouth, and she was tall and graceful like Sara.

They made splendid foils to each other; but in my opinion Sara carried the palm: she was more piquant and animated; her colouring was brighter, and she had more expression; but Charlie's Lily, as he called her, was quite as much admired, and indeed they were both striking-looking girls.

I saw that Uncle Max took a great deal of notice of Lesbia, who sat next to him. I could not hear their conversation, but a pretty pink colour tinged Lesbia's face, and her eyes grew dark and bright as she listened, and I saw her glance at her left hand where the half-hoop of diamonds glistened that Charlie had placed there; she had not quite forgotten the dear boy

then, for I am sure she sighed, but the next moment she had turned from Uncle Max, and was engaged in an eager discussion with Sara about some private theatricals in which Sara was to take a part.

When we went back to the drawing-room we found Fräulein in her favourite red silk dress, trying to repair the damage that Sooty had wrought in her half-knitted stocking, and Jill, looking very bored and uncomfortable, turning over the photograph album in a corner. She looked awkward and sallow in her Indian muslin gown: the flimsy stuff did not suit her any more than the pink coral beads she wore round her neck. Her black locks bobbed uneasily over the book. She looked bigger than ever when she stood up to speak to Lesbia.

'How that child is growing!' observed Aunt Philippa behind her fan to Fräulein, whose round face was beaming with smiles at the entrance of the ladies. 'That gown was made only a few weeks ago, and she is growing out of it already. Jocelyn, my love, why do you hunch your shoulders so when you talk to Lesbia? I am always telling you of this awkward habit.'

Poor Jill frowned and reddened a little under this maternal admonition; her eyes looked black and fierce as she sat down again with her photographs. This hour was always a penance to her; she could not speak or move easily, for fear of some remark from Aunt Philippa. When her mother and Fräulein interchanged confidences behind the big spangled fan, the poor child always thought they were talking about her.

Her bigness, her awkwardness, troubled Jill excessively. Her clumsy hands and feet seemed always in her way.

'I know I am the ugly duckling,' she would say, with tears in her eyes; 'but I shall never turn into a swan like Sara and Lesbia,—not that I want to be like them!'—with a little scorn in her voice. 'Lesbia is too tame, too namby-pamby, for my taste; and Sara is stupid. She laughs and talks, but she never says anything that people have not said a hundred times before. Oh, I am so tired of it all! I grow more cross and disagreeable every day,' finished Jill, who was very frank on the subject of her shortcoming.

I would have stopped and talked to Jill, only Lesbia tapped me on the arm rather peremptorily.

'Come into the back drawing-room,' she said, in a low voice. 'I want to speak to you.—Jill, why do you not practise

your new duet with Sara? She will play nothing but valses all the evening, unless you prevent it.'

But Jill shook her head sulkily; she felt safer in her corner. Sara was strumming on the grand pianoforte as we passed her; her slim fingers were running lazily over the keys in the 'Verliebt und Verloren' valse. Clarence was lighting the candles; William was bringing in the coffee; and Colonel Ferguson was following rather unceremoniously. People were always dropping in at Hyde Park Gate: perhaps Sara's bright eyes magnetised them. We had colonels and majors and captains at our will, for there was a martial craze in the house: to-night it was grave, handsome Colonel Ferguson.

He was rather a favourite with Uncle Brian and Aunt Philippa, perhaps because his troubles interested them; he had buried his young wife and child in an Indian grave, and some people said that he had come to England to look out for a second wife.

He was a very handsome man, and still young enough to find favour in a girl's sight, and his wealth made him a *grand parti* in the parents' eyes. At present he had bestowed equal attention on Sara and Lesbia, though close observers might have noticed that he lingered longest by Sara's side.

'How do you do, Colonel Ferguson?' said Sara, nodding to him in her bright, unconcerned way, as she finished her valse. 'Mother is over there talking to Fräulein: you will find your coffee ready for you.' And her glossy little head bent over the keys again, while the lazy music trickled through her fingers. Though Colonel Ferguson did as he was told, I fancied he would keep a close watch over the young performer.

The inner drawing-room had heavy velvet hangings that closed over the archway; on cold evenings the curtains would be drawn rather closely; there would be a bright fire, and a single lamp lighted. Very often Uncle Brian would retire with his book or paper when Sara's valses wearied him or the room filled with young officers. Since Ralph's death he had certainly become rather taciturn and unsociable. Aunt Philippa, who loved gaiety, never accompanied him, but now and then Jill would creep from her corner, when her mother was not looking, and slip behind the ruby curtains. I have caught her there sometimes sitting on the rug, with her rough head against her father's knee; they would both of them look a little shamefaced, as if they were guilty of some fault.

'Go to bed, Jill; it is time for little girls to be asleep,' he would say, patting her cheek. Jill would nestle it on his coat-sleeve for a moment, as she obeyed him. Her father had the softest place in her heart. She always would have it that her mother was hard on her, but she never complained of want of kindness from her father.

'Colonel Ferguson comes very often,' remarked Lesbia, a little peevishly, as she walked to the fireplace to warm herself: she was a chilly being, and loved warmth. 'His name is Donald, is it not? some one told me so: Donald Ferguson. Well, he is not bad; he may do for Sara. She has plenty of quicksilver to balance his gravity.'

I was rather surprised at this beginning; but without waiting for any answer, she went on.

'What is this Mr. Cunliffe tells me?' she asked, fixing her blue eyes on my face with marked interest. 'You are going to carry out your old scheme, Ursula, about nursing poor people and singing to them. He tells me you have chosen Heathfield for your future home, and that he is to find you lodgings. Sit down, dear, and tell me all about it,' she went on eagerly. 'I thought you had given up all that when—when——' but here she stopped and her lips trembled; of course she meant when Charlie died, but she rarely spoke his name. I would not let her see my astonishment,—she had never seemed so sisterly before,—but I took the seat close to her and talked to her as openly as though she were Jill or Uncle Max; now and then I paused, and we could hear Colonel Ferguson's deep voice: he was evidently turning over the pages of Sara's music.

'Go on, Ursula; I like to hear it,' Lesbia would say when I hesitated; she was not looking at me, but at the fire, with her cheek supported against her hand.

'What do you think of it?' I asked, presently, when I had finished and we had both been silent a few minutes listening to one of Mendelssohn's Songs without Words that Sara was playing very nicely.

'What do I think of it?' she replied, and her voice startled me, it was so full of pain. 'Oh, Ursula, I think you are to be envied! If I could only come with you and work too!—but there is mother, she could not do without me, and so we must just go on in the same old way.'

I was so shocked at the hopelessness of her tone, so taken aback at her words, that I could not answer her for a moment:

it seemed inconceivable to me that she could be saying such things. Poor pretty Lesbia, whom Charlie had loved and whom I considered a mere fragile butterfly. She was quite pale now, and her eyes filled suddenly with tears.

'You do not believe me, Ursula; no, I was right—you never understood me. I often told dear Charlie so. You think, because I laugh and dance and do as other girls do, that I have forgotten—that I do not suffer. Do you think I shall ever find any one so good and kind in this world again? Oh, you are hard on me, and I am so miserable, so unhappy, without Charlie. And I am not like you: I cannot work myself into forgetfulness; I must stop with mother and do as she bids me, and she says it is my duty to be gay.'

I was so ashamed of myself, of my mean injustice, that I was very nearly crying myself as I asked her pardon.

'Why do you say that?' she returned, almost pettishly, only she looked so miserable. 'I have nothing to forgive. I only want you to be good to me and not think the worst, for I'm really fond of you, Ursula, only you are so reserved and cold with me.'

'My poor dear,' I returned, taking the pretty face between my hands and kissing it. 'I will never be unkind to you again. Forgive me if I have misunderstood you: for Charlie's sake I want to love you.' And then she put her head down on my shoulder and cried a little, and bemoaned herself for being so unhappy; and all the time I comforted her my guilty conscience owned that Uncle Max was right.

CHAPTER IV

UNCLE MAX BREAKS THE ICE

UNCLE MAX was one of those men who like to take their own way about things; he never hurried himself, or allowed other people's impatience to get the better of him. 'There is a time for everything, as Solomon says,' was his favourite speech when any one reproached him with procrastination; 'depend upon it, the best work is done slowly. What is the use of so much hurry? When death comes we shall be sure to leave something unfinished.'

So for two whole days he just chatted commonplaces with Aunt Philippa, rallied Sara, who loved a joke, and talked politics with Uncle Brian, and never mentioned one word about my scheme; if I looked anxiously at him he pretended to misunderstand my meaning, and, in fact, behaved from morning to night in a most provoking way.

At last I could bear it no longer, and one wet afternoon, when I knew he was in the drawing-room, making believe to write his letters, but in reality getting a deal of amusement out of Sara's sprightly conversation, for she was never silent for two minutes if she could help it, I shut myself up in my own room, and would not go near him. I knew he would ask where Ursula was every half-hour, and would soon guess that I was out of humour about something; and possibly in an hour or two his conscience would prick him, and he would feel that I deserved reparation.

This little piece of ill-tempered artifice bore excellent fruit, for before I had nearly finished the piece of plain sewing I had set myself as a sort of penance, there was a tap at the door,

and Sara came in, looking very excited, with her bright eyes full of wonder.

'Oh, Ursula, there is such a fuss downstairs! Uncle Max has been telling us all about your absurd scheme. Mother is as cross as possible; she is so angry, and yet half crying at the same time.'

'And Uncle Brian,' I exclaimed eagerly,—'what does he say?'

'Oh, you know father's way. He just smiled as though the whole thing were beneath his notice, and went on reading his paper, and when mother appealed to him he said, coolly, that it was none of his business or hers either if Ursula chose to make a fool of herself; she had the right to do so,—something like that, you know.'

'How very pleasant!' I remarked satirically, for I hated the way Uncle Brian put down his foot on things that displeased him. I preferred Aunt Philippa's voluble arguments to that.

'To make things worse,' went on Sara cheerfully, 'Mrs. Fullerton and Lesbia have come in, and mother and Mrs. Fullerton are trying which can talk the faster. Lesbia asked for you, and then did not speak another word. What shall you do, Ursula, dear?'

'I shall just go down and ask Aunt Philippa for a cup of tea,' I returned coolly, folding up my work. Sara looked half frightened at my boldness, and then she began to laugh.

'It is so absurd, you know,' she returned, linking her arm in mine affectionately. 'What ever put such nonsense in your head? you are so comfortable here with us, and you have your own way, and I never tease you now about going to balls. It is so silly of you trying to make yourself miserable, and living in poky lodgings. You might as well be a fakir, or a dervish, or a Protestant nun, or anything else that is unpleasant.'

'My dear, you do not know anything about it,' I answered rather angrily. 'You and I are different people, Sara; we shall never think the same about anything.'

'Well, I don't know,' she returned, half affronted: 'when people try to be extra good I always find they succeed in making themselves extra disagreeable. It is far more religious, in my opinion, to be pleasant to every one, and make them believe that there is something cheerful in life, instead of pulling a

long face and doing such dreadfully bad things.' And after this little fling, in which she tried to be very severe, only as usual her dimples betrayed her, she begged me quite earnestly to smooth my hair, as though I were breaking one of the commandments by keeping it rough; and, having obliged her in this particular, and allowed her to peep at her own pretty face over my shoulder, we went down to the drawing-room as though we were the best of friends.

It was impossible to quarrel with Sara; she was as gay and irresponsible as a child; one might as well have been angry with a butterfly for brushing his gold-powdered wings across your face; the gentle flappings of Sara's speeches never raised a momentary vexation in my mind. I was often weary of her, but then we do weary of children's company sometimes; in certain moods her bright sparkling effervescence seemed to jar upon me: but I never liked to see her sad. Sadness did not become Sara; when she cried, which was as seldom as possible, and only when some one died, or she lost a pet canary, all her beauty dimmed, and she looked limp and forlorn, like a crushed butterfly or a draggled flower.

I do not think I was quite as cool and unconcerned as I wished to appear when I marched into the drawing-room, and, after greeting Mrs. Fullerton and Lesbia, asked Aunt Philippa for a cup of tea.

Quite a hubbub of voices had struck on my ear as I opened the door, and yet complete silence met me. Lesbia, indeed, whispered 'Poor Ursula' as I kissed her, but Mrs. Fullerton looked at me with grave disapproval. Aunt Philippa was sitting bolt upright behind the tea-tray, and handed me my cup, rather as Lady Macbeth did the dagger. I received it, however, as though it were my due, and glanced at Uncle Max; but he was too wise to look at me, so I said, as coolly as possible, 'Why are you so silent, and yet you were talking loudly enough before Sara and I came into the room?' For there is nothing like taking the bull of a dilemma by the horns; and I had plenty of, let us say, native impudence, only, personally, I should have given it another name; and then, of course, I brought the storm upon me.

Sara was right. Aunt Philippa certainly talked the faster; Mrs. Fullerton tried her best to edge in a word now and then, —a very scathing word, too,—but there was no silencing that flow of rapid talk. I quite envied her pure diction and the

ingenious turn of her sentences; she made so much of her own admirable foresight and care of me, and so little of my merits.

'I always said something like this would happen, Ursula. I have told your uncle often,—Brian, why don't you speak?—yes, indeed, I have told him often that I never met any one so strong-minded and self-willed. You need not laugh, Sara,—unless you do it to provoke me,—but I have been like a mother to Ursula. Thank heaven, my daughters are not of this pattern! they do not mistake eccentricity for goodness, or flaunt ridiculous notions in the faces of their elders.'

This was too bad of Aunt Philippa; only she had lost her temper, and was feeling utterly aggrieved, and Mrs. Fullerton, who was a meddlesome, good-humoured woman, and who had nothing of which to complain in life except a little over-plumpness and too much money, was agreeing with her like a good neighbour and friend.

Uncle Max was smiling, and pulling his beard behind his paper; but he made no attempt to check the flow of feminine eloquence. He had said his say like a man, and had taken my part behind my back, and he knew women were like new wine,—very sound and sweet, but they must find their vent. Aunt Philippa would be kinder ever after if we let her scold us properly, and took our scolding with a good grace.

Once or twice Uncle Brian let his eye-glasses dangle, and spoke a peevish word or two.

'Nonsense, my dear! have I not said over and over again that this is none of our business? Ursula is old enough to know her own mind; if she chooses to be eccentric we cannot hinder her. All this talk goes for nothing.'

'Ah, but, Mr. Garston, young people want guidance,' observed Mrs. Fullerton impressively, for Aunt Philippa was beginning to sob, partly from the effects of wasted eloquence, and perhaps with a little shortness of breathing: anyway, her anger was working itself out. 'If you were to advise Ursula as you would Sara, your influence might induce her to change her mind.'

'I cannot endorse your opinion, Mrs. Fullerton,' returned Uncle Brian drily. 'I am far too keen an observer of human nature to think we can talk sense to deaf ears with any benefit.—Ursula, my child,' turning to me with a smile that might have been kinder, but perhaps he meant it to be so, 'there is not a grain of sense in your scheme: in spite of Cunliffe's

eloquence, it will not hold water; in fact, in a little while you will be glad to come back to us again. When you do, I think I can promise that we will not laugh at you more than once a day, and then moderately.'

Now, this speech of Uncle Brian's made me very angry. No doubt he meant to be kind, and to show me that if my scheme failed I might come home to them again; but I was so much in earnest that his satire and his laughing at me hurt me more than all Aunt Philippa's hard speeches. So I flushed up, and for the first time tears came into my eyes; for he had prophesied failure, and I could not bear that, and I might have said words in my sudden irritation for which I should have been sorry afterwards, only Lesbia, who had sat behind me all this time, as silent and soft-breathed as a mouse, got up quickly and took my hand and stood by me.

'I think you have all said plenty of hard things to Ursula, and no one has been kind to her. I think she deserves praise and not all this blame; if she cannot lead the comfortable life we do, thinking how we are to get the most pleasure and enjoy ourselves, it is because she is better than we are, and thinks more about her duty. Mrs. Garston,—I do not mean to be rude, I am far too fond of you all, because you have all been so good to me,'—and here Lesbia's white throat swelled,—'but I cannot bear to hear Ursula so blamed. Mr. Cunliffe, I know you agree with me, you said so many nice things when Ursula was out of the room.'

This little burst of eloquence surprised us all. Uncle Max said afterwards that he was quite touched by it. Lesbia was generally so quiet and undemonstrative that her words took Aunt Philippa by storm. She might have been offended by Lesbia saying that I was better than the rest of them,—a fact that my conscience most emphatically contradicted; but when Lesbia kissed her, and begged her to think better of things, she cried a little because Charlie was not there to see how pretty she could look, and then cheered up, and made overtures that I might come and kiss her too, which I did most willingly, and with a full heart, remembering she was my father's sister and had been good to me according to her lights.

When Uncle Max saw that reconciliation was imminent, and that by Lesbia's help I was likely to have the best of it, my own way, and a good deal of petting to follow,—for they would all make more of me during the short time I would be

with them,—he threw down his paper in high good-humour and joined us.

'That is what I call sensible, Mrs. Garston,' he said, paying her a compliment at once, as she sat flushed and fanning herself, 'and Ursula ought to feel herself very grateful to you for your forbearance and acquiescence in her plan.'

I do not believe he knew any more than myself where the forbearance had been, but he took it all for granted.

'Nothing puts heart into a person more than feeling sure of one's friends' sympathy. Now, we all of us, even Garston, in spite of his disapproval, wish Ursula good success in her scheme; some of us think better of it than others; for my own part, I am so convinced that she will have so many difficulties and disappointments to hamper her that I cannot bear to say a discouraging word.' And yet he had said dozens, only I was magnanimous and forgave him.

This settled the matter, for Aunt Philippa grew so sorry for me that she was almost out of breath again pitying me. 'I do not believe she can help it,' she said, in rather an audible aside to Mrs. Fullerton; 'her mother had a sort of craze about these things, and seemed to think it part of her religion to make herself uncomfortable; and poor Herbert was quite as bad, only he was a clergyman, and it did not matter so much with him: so I suppose the poor child inherits it. This sort of thing runs in families,' went on Aunt Philippa, in an awe-struck voice, as though it were a species of insanity. 'I am only thankful that my own girls have not got these notions.'

Mrs. Fullerton found out now that it was time to go home and dress for dinner, so Lesbia came round to me and whispered that I must come and see her soon, for she wanted to talk to me, and not to Sara, who was always running in and out.

'I am very fond of Sara, and like to see her, she amuses me so; but when I want advice or sympathy I feel I must come to you now, Ursula.' And though she had never said so much to me before, I knew she meant it; that there was some change in her, some want of nature or heaven knows what feminine need, when she missed me, and wanted me, and found some comfort in the thought of me.

There was no time for more discussion, and indeed we were all a little weary of it; but after dinner Uncle Max, who seemed in excellent spirits, as though he had done something wonderful and was proud of his own achievements, beckoned

me into the inner drawing-room under pretence of showing me some engravings, and when we found ourselves alone, he said pleasantly, though abruptly—

'Well, Ursula, I thought you would be glad to have an opportunity of thanking me, for of course you feel very grateful to me for all the trouble I have taken.'

'Oh, indeed!' I returned scornfully, for it would never do to encourage this vainglorious spirit. 'I should have felt more disposed to thank you if you had not kept me for two days in suspense!'

'That is the result of doing a woman a good turn,' shaking his head mournfully. 'The moment she gets her own way, she turns upon you and rends you. Fie, fie on you, little she-bear!'

'Oh, Max, do be quiet a moment.'

'Max, indeed! Where are your manners, child? What would Garston say if he heard your flippancy?' But by the way he stroked his beard and looked at me, I saw he was not displeased. No one would have taken him for my uncle who had seen us together, for he was a young-looking man, and I was old for my age.

'I do want you to be serious a moment,' I went on plaintively. 'I am really very obliged to you for having broken the ice: after all, I have not been badly submerged. I soon rose to the surface when Lesbia held out a helping hand.'

'Well, now, Ursula, do you not agree with me?—was not Lesbia a darling?'

'She was very nice and sisterly,' I confessed. 'She has more in her than I ever thought. Poor little thing! I am afraid she is very unhappy, only she hides it so.'

'Just so. That shows her good sense: the world is very intolerant of a protracted grief; its victims must learn to dry their eyes quickly.'

Uncle Max was becoming philosophical: this would never do.

'Never mind about Lesbia,' I observed impatiently, 'we can talk about her in the next room; what I want to know is, how soon I may come to Heathfield.' For I knew how dilatory men can be about other people's business, and I fully expected that Uncle Max would put me off to the summer.

'You may come as soon as you like,' he returned, rather too carelessly. 'Shall we say next week, or will that be too early?'

I suppressed my astonishment cleverly, but was down on him in a moment.

'I should like to have some place found for me first,' I remarked sententiously; 'you must take lodgings for me first, and then I can settle my plans.'

'Oh, that is done already,' he observed cheerfully. 'I have spoken to Mrs. Barton about you, and she has very nice rooms vacant. I wanted them for Tudor, until I mooted the vicarage plan. It is a tidy little place, Ursula, and I think you will be very comfortable there.'

I felt that Uncle Max deserved praise, and I gave it to him without stint or limit; he took it nobly, like a man who feels he has earned his reward.

'I fancy I have done a neat thing,' he said modestly. 'Directly I read your letter and saw that you were in earnest, I went down to Mrs. Barton and had a long talk with her. Do you remember the White Cottage, Ursula, that stands just where the road dips a little, after you have passed the vicarage? It is on the main road that leads to the common: there is a field, and one or two houses, and on the right the road branches off to Main Street, where my poorer parishioners live. Oh, I see that you have forgotten. Well, there is a low white cottage, standing far back from the road, with rather a pretty garden, and a field at the back: people call it the White Cottage; though it is smothered in jasmine in the summer; and there is a nice little parlour with a bedroom over it. That will do capitally, I fancy. Old Mrs. Meredith lived there until her death, and she left her furniture to Mrs. Barton.'

I expressed myself as being well pleased at this description, and then inquired a little anxiously if there were room for my piano and my books.

'Oh yes, it is quite a good-sized room; that is why I wanted it for Tudor. You will not mind it being a little low: it is only a cottage, remember. There is a nice easy couch, I spotted that at once, and a capital easy-chair, and some corner cupboards that will hold a store of good things; you can make it as pretty as possible.'

'And Mrs. Barton, Max,—is she a pleasant person?'

'There could not be a pleasanter. You will find yourself in clover, Ursula, you will indeed; she is a nice little woman, and has all the cardinal virtues, I believe; she is a widow

and has a big son who works at Roberts's, the builder's. Nathaniel is very big, very big indeed, so much so that I feel it my duty to warn you of his size, for fear you should receive a shock. The cottage just holds him when he sits down, and his mother's one anxiety is that he should not bring down the kitchen ceiling more than once a year, as it hurts his head and comes expensive; he has a black collie they call Tinker, the cleverest dog in the place, so Nathaniel says; and these three constitute the household of the White Cottage.'

I was charmed with Uncle Max's account; the cottage seemed cosy and homelike. I knew I could trust his opinion; he was a good judge of character, and was seldom wrong in his estimate of a man, woman, or child, and he would be especially careful to intrust me to a thoroughly reliable person. I begged him therefore to close with Mrs. Barton at once; she asked a very moderate price for her rooms, and I could have afforded higher terms. It would not take me long to pack my books and other treasures: some of them I should be obliged to leave behind, but I must take all Charlie's books and my own, and my favourite pictures and bits of china, and a store of fine linen for my own use. I was somewhat demoralised by the luxury at Hyde Park Gate, and liked to make myself comfortable after my own way. Poor Charlie used to laugh at me and say I should be an old maid, and, as I considered this fact inevitable, I took his teasing in good part.

I told Uncle Max that I thought I could be ready in another week, and that I saw no good in delay. He assented to this, and was kind enough to add that the sooner I came the better. I was a little dismayed to find that he had not considered himself bound to keep my counsel; he had talked about my plan to his curate, Mr. Tudor, and I gathered from his manner, for he refused to tell me any more, that he had discussed it with another person.

This was too bad, but I would not let him see that this vexed me. I wanted to settle in and begin my work quietly before the neighbourhood knew of my existence; but if Uncle Max published my intended arrival in every house he visited, I felt I could not even worship in comfort, for fear the congregation should be eying me suspiciously.

I thought it better to change the subject: so I began to question him about Mr. Tudor and Mrs. Drabble, the latter being the ruling power at the vicarage; and he fell upon the

bait and swallowed it eagerly, so my vexation passed unnoticed.

Uncle Max did not live quite alone. His house was large, far too large for an unmarried man, and he was very sociable by nature, so he induced his curate to take up his abode with him; but the two men and Mrs. Drabble, the housekeeper, and the maid under her, could not fill it, and several rooms were shut up. Lawrence Tudor had been a pupil of Uncle Max, and the two were very much attached to each other. Uncle Max had brought him up once or twice to Hyde Park Gate, and we had all been much pleased with him. He was not in the least good-looking, but I remember Sara said he was gentlemanly and pleasant and had a nice voice. I knew his frank manner and evident affection for Uncle Max prepossessed me in his favour; he had been very athletic in his college days, and was passionately fond of boating and cricket, and he was very musical and sang splendidly.

The little Uncle Max had told me about him had strongly interested me. The Tudors had been wealthy people, and Uncle Max had spent more than one long vacation at their house, coaching Walter Tudor, who was going in for an army examination, and reading Greek with Lawrence (or Laurie, as they generally called him) and another brother, Ben.

Lawrence had meant to enter the army too. Nelson, the eldest of all, was already in India, and had a captaincy. They were all fine, stalwart young men, fond of riding and hunting and any out-of-door pursuit. But there never would have been a parson among them but for the failure of the company in which Mr. Tudor's money was invested. He had been one of the directors, and from wealth he was reduced to poverty.

There was no money to buy Walter a commission, so he enlisted, bringing fresh trouble to his parents by doing so. Ben entered an office, but Lawrence was kept at Oxford by an uncle's generosity, and under strong pressure consented to take orders.

The poor young fellow had no special vocation, and he owned to Max afterwards that he feared that he had done the wrong thing. I am afraid Max thought so too, but he would not discourage him by saying so; on the contrary, he treated him in a bracing manner, telling him that he had put his hand to the plough, and that there must be no looking backward, and bidding him pluck up heart and do his duty

as well as he could; and then he smoothed his way by asking him to be his curate and live with him, so saving him from the loneliness and discomfort of some curates' existence, who are at the mercy of their landladies and laundresses.

So the two lived merrily together, and Lawrence Tudor was all the better man and parson for Uncle Max's genial help and sympathy; and though Mrs. Drabble grumbled and did not take kindly to him at first, she made him thoroughly comfortable, and mended his socks and sewed on his buttons in motherly fashion. Mrs. Drabble was quite a character in her way; she was a fair, fussy little woman, who looked meek enough to warrant the best of tempers; she had a soft voice and manner that deceived you, and a vague rambling sort of talk that landed you nowhere; but if ever woman could be a mild virago Mrs. Drabble was that woman. She worshipped her master, and never allowed any one to find fault with him; but with Mr. Tudor, or the maid, or any one who interfered with her, she could be a flaxen-haired termagant; she could scold in a low voice for half an hour together without minding a single stop or pausing to take breath. Mr. Tudor used to laugh at her, or get out of her way, when he had had enough of it; she only tried it on her master once, but Max stood and stared at her with such surprise and such puzzled good-humour that she grew ashamed and stopped in the very middle of a sentence.

But, with all her temper, neither of them could have spared Mrs. Drabble, she made them so comfortable.

CHAPTER V

'WHEN THE CAT IS AWAY'

AUNT PHILIPPA had one very good point in her character: she was not of a nagging disposition. When she scolded she did it thoroughly, and was perhaps a long time doing it, but she never carried it into the next day.

Jill always said her mother was too indolent for a prolonged effort; but then poor Jill often said naughty things. But we all of us knew that Aunt Philippa's wrath soon evaporated; it made her hot and uncomfortable while it lasted, and she was glad to be quit of it: so she refrained herself prudently when I spoke of my approaching departure; and, being of a bustling temperament, and not averse to changes unless they gave her much trouble, she took a great deal of interest in my arrangements, and bought a nice little travelling-clock that she said would be useful to me.

Seeing her so pleasant and reasonable, I made a humble petition that Jill might be set free from some of her lessons to help me pack my books and ornaments. She made a little demur at this, and offered Draper's services instead; but it was Jill I wanted, for the poor child was fretting sadly about my going away, and I thought it would comfort her to help me. So after a time Aunt Philippa relented, after extorting a promise from Jill that she would work all the harder after I had gone; and, as young people seldom think about the future except in the way of foolish dreams, Jill cheerfully gave her word. So for the last few days we were constantly together, and Fräulein had an unexpected holiday. Jill worked like a horse in my service, and only broke one Dresden group; she came to

me half crying with the fragment in her hand,—the poor little shepherdess had lost her head as well as her crook, and the pink coat of the shepherd had an unseemly rent in it,—but I only laughed at the disaster, and would not scold her for her awkwardness. China had a knack of slipping through Jill's fingers; she had a loose uncertain grasp of things that were brittle and delicate; she had not learned to control her muscles or restrain her strength. She had a way of lifting me up when I teased her that turns me giddy to remember: I was quite a child in her hands. She was always ashamed of herself when she had done it, and begged my pardon, and as long as she put me on my feet again I was ready to forgive anything. Jill felt a sort of forlorn consolation in using up her strength in my service: she would hardly let me do anything myself; I might sit down and order her about from morning to night if I chose.

I made her very happy by leaving some of my possessions under her care—some books that I knew she would like to read, and other treasures that I had locked up in my wardrobe. Jill had the key and could rummage if she liked, but she told me quite seriously that it would comfort her to come and look at them sometimes. 'It will feel as though you were coming back some day, Ursie,' she said affectionately.

Late one afternoon I left her busy in my room, and went to the Albert Hall Mansions to bid good-bye to Lesbia. I had called once or twice, but had always missed her. So I slipped across in the twilight, as I thought at that hour they would have returned from their drive.

The Albert Hall Mansions were only a stone's throw from Uncle Brian's house, so I considered myself safe from any remonstrance on Aunt Philippa's part. I liked to go there in the soft, early dusk; the smooth noiseless ascent of the lift, and the lighted floors that we passed, gave one an odd, dreamy feeling. Mrs. Fullerton had a handsome suite of apartments on the third floor, and there was a beautiful view from her drawing-room window of the Park and the Albert Memorial. It was a nice, cheerful situation, and Mrs. Fullerton, who liked gaiety, preferred it to Rutherford Lodge, though Lesbia had been born there and she had passed her happiest days in it.

I found Mrs. Fullerton alone, but she seemed very friendly, and was evidently glad to see me. I suppose I was better company than her own thoughts.

I liked Mrs. Fullerton, after a temperate fashion. She was a nice little woman, and would have been nicer still if she had talked less and thought more. But when one's words lie at the tip of one's tongue there is little time for reflection, and there are sure to be tares among the wheat.

She was looking serious this evening, but that did not interfere with her comeliness or her pleasant manners. I found her warmth gratifying, and prepared to unbend more than usual.

'Sit down, my dear. No, not on that chair: take the easy one by the fire. You are looking rather fagged, Ursula. It seems to be the fashion with young people now: they get middle-aged before their time. Oh yes, Lesbia is out. It is the Engleharts' "At Home," and she promised to go with Mrs. Pierrepoint. But she will be back soon. Now we are alone, I want to ask you a question. I am rather anxious about Lesbia. Dr. Pratt says there is a want of tone about her. She is too thin, and her appetite is not good. The child gets prettier every day, but she looks far too delicate.'

I could not deny this. Lesbia certainly looked far from strong, and then she took cold so easily. I hinted that perhaps late hours and so much visiting (for the Fullertons had an immense circle of acquaintances, with possibly half a dozen friends among them) might be bad for her.

Mrs. Fullerton looked rather mournful at this.

'I hope you have not put that in her head,' she returned uneasily. 'All yesterday she was begging me to give up the place and go back to Rutherford Lodge. Major Parkhurst is going to India in February, and so the house will be on our hands.'

'I think the change will be good for Lesbia. It is such a pretty place, and she was always so fond of it.'

'Oh, it is pretty enough,' with a discontented air; 'but life in a village is a very tame affair. There are not more than four families in the whole place whom we can visit, and when we want a little gaiety we have to drive into Pinkerton.'

'I think it would be good for Lesbia's health, Mrs. Fullerton.'

'Well, well,' a little peevishly, 'we must talk to Dr. Pratt about it. But how is Lesbia to settle well if I bury her in that poky little village? Perhaps I ought not to say so to you, Ursula; but poor dear Charlie has been dead these two years, so there can be no harm in speaking of such things now. But Sir Henry Sinclair is here a great deal, and there is no mistaking his intentions, only Lesbia keeps him at such a distance.'

I thought it very bad taste of Mrs. Fullerton always to talk to me about Lesbia's suitors. Lesbia never mentioned such things herself. As far as I could judge, she was very shy with them all. I could not believe that the placid young baronet had any chance with her. She might possibly marry, but poor Charlie's successor would hardly be a thick-set, clumsy young man, with few original ideas of his own. Colonel Ferguson would have been far better; but he evidently preferred Sara.

I was spared any reply, for Lesbia entered the room at that moment. She looked more delicately fair than usual, perhaps because of the contrast with her heavy furs. Her hair shone like gold under her little velvet bonnet, but, though she was so warmly dressed, she shivered and crept as close as possible to the fire.

Mrs. Fullerton had some notes to write, so she went into the dining-room to write them, and very good-naturedly left us by ourselves.

Lesbia looked at me rather wistfully.

'I have missed you twice, Ursula. I am so sorry; and now you go the day after to-morrow. I wish I could do something for you. Is there nothing you could leave in my charge?'

'Only Jill,' I said, half laughing. 'If you would take a little more notice of her after I have gone, I should be so thankful to you.'

I thought Lesbia seemed somewhat amused at the request.

'Poor old Jill! I will do my best; but she never will talk to me. I think I should like her better than Sara if she would only open her lips to me. Well, Ursula, what have you and mother been talking about?'

'About Rutherford Lodge,' I returned quickly. 'Do you really want to go back there?'

'Did mother talk about that?' looking excessively pleased. 'Oh yes, I am longing to go back. I don't want to frighten you, Ursie, dear,—and, indeed, there is no need,—but this life is half killing me. I am too close to Hyde Park Gate; one never gets a chance of forgetting old troubles; and then mother is always saying gaiety is good for me, and she will accept every invitation that comes; and I get so horribly tired; and then one cannot fight so well against depression.'

I took her hand silently, but made no answer; but I suppose she felt my sympathy.

'You must not think I am wicked and rebellious,' she went

on, with a sigh. 'I promised dear Charlie to be brave, and not let the trouble spoil my life; he would have it that I was so young that happiness must return after a time, and so I mean to do my best to be happy, for mother's sake, as well as my own; and I know Charlie would not like me to go on grieving,' with a sad little smile.

'No, darling, and I quite understand you.' And she cheered up at that.

'I knew you would, and that is why I want to tell you things. I have tried to do as mother wished, but I do not think her plan answers; excitement carries one away, and one can be as merry as other girls for a time, but it all comes back worse than ever.'

'Mere gaiety never satisfied an aching heart yet.'

'No; I told mother so, and I begged her to go back to Rutherford because it is so quiet and peaceful there and I think I shall be happier. I shall have my garden and conservatory, and there will be plenty of riding and tennis. I am very fond of our vicar's wife, Mrs. Trevor, and I rather enjoy helping her in the Sunday-school and at the mothers' meeting; not that I do much, for I am not like you, Ursula, but I like to pretend to be useful sometimes.'

'I see what you mean, Lesbia: your life will be more natural and less strained than it is here.'

'Yes, and time will hang less heavy on my hands. I do love gardening, Ursula. I know I shall forget my troubles when I find myself with dear old Patrick again, grumbling because I will pick the roses. I shall sleep better in my little room, and wake less unhappy. Oh, mother!' as Mrs. Fullerton entered at that moment with a half-finished note in her hand, 'I am telling Ursula how home-sick I am, and how I long for the dear old Lodge. Do let us go back, mother darling: I want to hunt for violets again in the little shady hollow beyond the lime-tree walk.'

'Yes, dearest, we will go if you really wish it so much,' returned Mrs. Fullerton, with a sigh. 'Why, my pet, did you think I should refuse?' as Lesbia put her arms round her neck and thanked her. 'When a mother has only got one child she is not likely to deny her much: is she, Ursula?'

'Oh, mother, how good you are to me!' returned Lesbia, and her blue eyes were shining with joy. When Mrs. Fullerton had left the room again she told me that she had often cried herself

to sleep with the longing to be in her old home again; she loved every flower in the garden, every animal about the place, and she grew quite bright and cheerful as she planned out her days. No, there was nothing morbid about Lesbia's nature; she was an honest, well-meaning girl, who had had a great disappointment in her life; she meant to outlive it if she could, to be as happy as possible. A wise instinct told her that her best chance of healing lay in country sights and sounds: the fresh gallop over the downs, the pleasant saunter through the sweet Sussex lanes, the sweet breath of her roses and carnations, would all woo her back to health and cheerfulness. When the pretty colour came back into Lesbia's face her mother would not regret her sacrifice; and then I remembered that Charlie's friend Harcourt Manners lived about half a dozen miles from Rutherford, and always attended the Pinkerton dances, and he was a nice intelligent fellow. But I scolded back the foolish thoughts, and felt ashamed of myself for entertaining them.

I parted from Lesbia very affectionately, for she seemed loath to say good-bye, but I knew poor Jill would be grumbling at my absence; the others were dining out, and I had promised to join the schoolroom tea, which was to be half an hour later on my account, but it was nearly six before I made my appearance, very penitent at my delay, and fully expecting a scolding.

I found Jill, however, kneeling on the rug, making toast, with Sooty in her arms; she had blacked her face in her efforts, but looked in high good-humour.

'Fräulein has gone out for the whole evening: that freckled Fräulein Misschenstock has been here, and has invited her to tea and supper. Mamma said she could go, as you would remain with me, so we shall be alone and cosy for the whole evening. Now, you may pour out tea, if you like, for I have all this buttered toast on my mind. I am as hungry as a hunter; but there is a whole seed-cake, I am glad to see. Now, darling, be quick, for you have kept me so long waiting.' And Jill brushed vigorously at her blackened cheek, and beamed at me.

But, alas! we had reckoned without our host, and a grand disappointment was in store for us, though, as it turned out, things were not as bad as they appeared to be at first.

I was praising Jill's buttered toast, for I knew she prided herself on this delicacy, and she had just cut herself a thick wedge of the seed-cake, which she was discussing with a schoolgirl's appetite, when I heard Uncle Brian's voice calling for

Ursula rather loudly: so I ran to the head of the staircase, and, to my surprise, saw him coming up in his slow, dignified manner.

'Look here, Ursula, I shall be late at the Pollocks', and your aunt and Sara have gone on, and there is Tudor in the drawing-room, just arrived with a message from Cunliffe. Of course we must put him up; but the trouble is there is no dinner, and of course he is famished: young men always are.'

My heart sank as I thought of Jill, but there was no help for it. Max's friends were sacred. Mr. Tudor must be made as comfortable as possible.

'It cannot be helped, Uncle Brian,' I returned, trying to keep the vexation I felt out of my voice. 'Supposing you send Mr. Tudor up to the schoolroom, and we will give him some tea. Jill has made some excellent buttered toast, and Clayton can get some supper for him by and by in the dining-room: there is sure to be a cold joint,—or perhaps Mrs. Martin will have something cooked for him.'

'That must do,' he replied, somewhat relieved at this advice. 'We shall be back soon after tea, so you will not have him long on your hands. Entertain him as well as you can, there's a good girl.' He had quite forgotten, and so had I for the moment, that Fräulein was out for the evening, and that possibly Aunt Philippa might object to a young man joining the schoolroom tea; but, as it proved afterwards, she was more shocked at Uncle Brian than at any one else: she said he ought to have given up his dinner and stayed with his guest.

'I confess I do not see what Ursula could have done better,' she remarked severely; 'she could not spend the evening alone with him in the drawing-room; and of course he wanted his tea. That comes of allowing Fräulein to neglect her duties: she is too fond of spending her time with Fräulein Misschenstock.'

I did not dare break the news to Jill, for fear she should lock herself in her own room, for she never liked the society of young men; they laughed at her too much, in a civil sort of way: so I hurried down into the drawing-room and explained matters to Mr. Tudor, whom I found walking about the room and looking somewhat ill at ease.

He seemed rather amused at the idea of the schoolroom tea, but owned that he was hungry and tired, as he had had a fourteen-mile walk that day.

'It is all Mr. Cunliffe's fault that I am quartered on you in this way,' he said, laughing a little nervously—and very likely

Uncle Brian's dignified reception had made him uncomfortable; 'but he would insist on my bringing my bag, and Mr. Garston has a dinner-engagement, and cannot attend to business until to-morrow morning.'

'I am afraid you would like a dinner-engagement too, after your fourteen miles,' I returned, in a sympathetic voice, for he did look very tired. 'We will give you some tea now, and then you can get rid of the dust of the journey, and by that time Mrs. Martin will have done her best to provide you with some supper.'

'I see I have fallen in good hands,' he replied, brightening at this in a boyish sort of way. 'Where is the schoolroom? I did not know there was such an apartment, but of course Mrs. Garston told me that her youngest daughter had not finished her studies. I think I saw her once: she was very tall, and had dark hair.'

'Oh yes; that was Jill—I mean Jocelyn, but we always call her Jill. Will you come this way, please? Fräulein is out, and we were having a good time by ourselves.'

'And I have come to spoil it,' he answered regretfully, as I opened the door.

I shall never forget Jill's face when she saw us on the threshold. She quite forgot to shake hands with Mr. Tudor in her dismay, but stood hunching her shoulders, with Sooty still clasped in her arms and her great eyes staring at him, till he said a pleasant word to her, and then she flushed up, and subsided into her chair. I stole an anxious glance at the cake; to my great relief, Jill had been quietly proceeding with her meal in my absence, for I knew that in her chagrin she would refuse to touch another morsel. I wondered a little what Mr. Tudor would think of her ungracious reception of him; but he showed his good-breeding by taking no notice of it and confining his remarks to me.

Jill's ill-humour thawed by and by when she saw how he entered into the spirit of the fun. He vaunted his own skill with the toasting-fork, and, in spite of fatigue, insisted on superintending another batch of the buttered toast; he was very particular about the clearness of the fire, and delivered quite an harangue on the subject. Jill's sulky countenance relaxed by and by; she opened her lips to contradict him, and was met so skilfully that she appealed to me for assistance.

By the time tea was over, we were as friendly with Mr.

Tudor as though we had known him all our lives, and Jill was laughing heartily over his racy descriptions of schoolroom feasts and other escapades of his youth. He looked absurdly young, in spite of his clerical dress; he had a bright face and a peculiarly frank manner that made me trust him at once; he did not look particularly clever, and Jill had the best of him in argument, but one felt instinctively that he was a man who would never do a mean or an unkind action, that he would tell the truth to his own detriment with a simple honesty that made up for lack of talent.

I could see that Jill's bigness and cleverness surprised him. He evidently found her amusing, for he tried to draw her out; perhaps he liked to see how her great eyes opened and then grew bright, as she tossed back her black locks or shook them impatiently. When Jill was happy and at ease her face would grow illuminated; her varying expression, her animation, her quaint picturesque talk, made her thoroughly interesting. I was never dull in Jill's company; she had always something fresh to say; she had a fund of originality, and drew her words newly coined from her own mint.

I do not believe that Mr. Tudor quite understood her, for he was a simple young fellow. But she piqued his curiosity. I must have appeared quite a tame, commonplace person beside her. When Jill went out of the room to fetch something, he asked me, rather curiously, how old she was, and when I told him that she was a mere child, not quite sixteen, he said, half musing, that she seemed older than that. She knew so much about things, but he supposed she was very clever.

We went down into the drawing-room after this, and Jill kept me company while Mr. Tudor supped in state, with Clayton and Clarence to wait on him. He came up after a very short interval, and said, half laughing, that his supper had been a most formal affair.

'By the bye, Miss Garston,' he observed, as though by an afterthought, 'I hear you are coming down to Heathfield.' He stole a glance at Jill as he spoke. She had discarded her Indian muslin and coral necklace as being too grand for the occasion, and wore her ruby velveteen, that always suited her admirably. She looked very nice, and quite at her ease, sitting half-buried in Uncle Brian's arm-chair, instead of being bolt upright in her corner. She had drawn her big feet carefully under her gown, and was quite a presentable young lady.

I thought Mr. Tudor was rather impressed with the transformation; Cinderella in her brown schoolroom frock, with a smutty cheek and rumpled collar, was quite a different person: —presto—change—the young princess in the ruby dress has smooth locks and a thick gold necklace. She has big shining eyes and a happy child's laugh. Her little white teeth gleam in the lamplight. I do not wonder in the least that Mr. Tudor looks at Jill as he talks to me. It is a habit people have with me.

But I answered him quite graciously.

'Yes, I am coming down to Heathfield the day after to-morrow. I suppose I ought to say *Deo volente*. I hope you all mean to be good to me, Mr. Tudor, and not laugh at my poor little pretensions.'

'I shall not laugh, for one,' he replied, looking me full in the face now with his honest eyes. 'I think it is a good work, Miss Garston. The vicar'—he always called Uncle Max the vicar—'was talking about it up at Gladwyn the other day, and Mr. Hamilton said——'

'Gladwyn? Is that the name of a house?' I asked, interrupting Mr. Tudor a little abruptly.

'To be sure. Have you not heard of Gladwyn?' And at that he looked a little amused. But I was not fated to hear more of Gladwyn that night, for the next moment Aunt Philippa came bustling into the room, and Sara and Uncle Brian followed her.

CHAPTER VI

THE WHITE COTTAGE

GOOD-BYE is an unpleasant word to say, and I said mine as quickly as possible, but I did not like the remembrance of Jill's wet cheek that I had kissed: I was haunted by it during the greater part of my brief journey. For some inexplicable reason I had chosen to arrive at Heathfield late in the afternoon; I wanted to slip into my new home in the dusk. I knew that Uncle Max would meet me at the station and look after my luggage, so I should have no trouble, and I hoped that I should wake up among my neighbours the next morning before they knew of my arrival.

When we stopped at some station a little while before we reached Heathfield, the guard put a gentleman in my compartment: I fancied they had not noticed me, for a large black retriever followed him.

The gentleman lifted his hat directly he saw me, and apologised for his dog's presence, until I assured him it made no difference to me; and then he drew a newspaper from his bag and tried to read by the somewhat flickering light. As I had nothing else to do, and his attention was evidently very much absorbed, I looked at him from time to time in an idle, furtive sort of way.

He had taken off his hat and put it on the seat; his dark smooth-shaven face reminded me of a Romish priest, but he had no tonsure; instead of that he had thick closely-cropped hair without a hint or suspicion of baldness, was strongly built and very broad, and looked like a man who had undergone training.

I was rather given to study the countenances of my fellow-

passengers,—it was a way I had,—but I was not particularly prepossessed with this man's face; it looked hard and stern, and his manner, though perfectly gentlemanly, was a little brusque. I abandoned the Romish priest theory after a second glance, and told myself he was more like a Roman gladiator.

As we approached Heathfield, he folded up his paper and patted his dog, who had sat all this time at his feet, with his head on his knees. It was a beautiful, intelligent animal, and had soft eyes like a woman, and by the way he wagged his tail and licked the hand that fondled his glossy head I saw he was devoted to his master.

Just then I encountered a swift, searching glance from the stranger, which rather surprised me. He had looked at me, as he spoke, in an indifferent way; but this second look was a little perplexing; it was as though he had suddenly recognised me, and that the fact amused him; and yet we had never met before,—it was such an uncommon face, so singular altogether, that I could never have forgotten it.

I grew irritated without reason, for how could a stranger recognise me? Happily the lights from the station flashed before my eyes at that moment, and I began nodding and smiling towards a corner by the bookstall, where a felt hat and brown head were all that I could see of Uncle Max.

'Well, here you are, Ursula, punctual to a minute,' exclaimed Max, as he shook hands. 'Halloo, Hamilton, where did you spring from?' going to the carriage door to speak to my fellow-passenger. I was so provoked at this, fearing an introduction, for Max was such a friendly soul, that I went to the luggage-van and began counting my boxes, and Max did not hurry himself to look after me.

'Now, then,' he observed cheerily, when he condescended to join me, 'is your luggage all right? Do you mean all those traps are yours? Bless me, Ursula, what will Mrs. Barton say? Put them on the fly, you fellows, and be sharp about it. Come along, child; it is pelting cats and dogs, if you know what that means: you have a wet welcome to Heathfield.'

I took the news philosophically, and assured him it did not matter in the least. We could hear the rain beating against the windows as we reached the booking-office. A closed waggonette with a pair of horses was waiting at the door; my fellow-passenger, whom Max had addressed as Hamilton, was standing

on the pavement, speaking somewhat angrily to the coachman. I heard the man's answer as he touched his hat.

'Miss Darrell said I was to bring the waggonette, sir: it did not rain so badly when the order was brought round to the stables.'

'I could have taken a fly easily: it is worse than folly bringing out the horses this wet night. Jump in, Nap. What, must I go first? Manners before a wet coat.'

I heard no more, for Max hurried me into a fly, and the waggonette passed us on the road.

'Who was that?' I asked curiously.

'Oh, that is Mr. Hamilton. Why did you not wait for me to introduce him to you, Ursula? He is a rich doctor who lives in these parts; he practises for his own pleasure among the poor people; he will not attend gentle-folks. He told me that he had studied medicine meaning to make it his profession, but a distant relative died and left him a fortune, and by so doing spoiled his career.'

'That was rather ungracious of him; but he looks the sort of man who could do plenty of grumbling. Where does he live, Max?'

'Oh, at Gladwyn: I cannot show you the house now, because we do not pass it. There is the church, Ursula, and there is Tudor in his mackintosh coming out of the vicarage: that is the best of Lawrence, he never shirks his duty; he hates the job, but he does it. He is going down to see old Smithers and get sworn at for his pains.'

'Have you got any cases ready for me, Max?' I asked, with a little tingling of excitement.

'Hamilton has. I was at Gladwyn the other evening, and had a talk with him. He was a little off-hand about your mission; he thinks you must be romantic, and all that sort of thing. You would have laughed to have heard him talk, and I let him go on just for the joke of it. It was rich to hear him say that he did not believe in hysterical goodness; a girl would do anything now to get herself talked about—no, I did not mean to repeat that,' interrupting himself, with an annoyed air. 'Hamilton always says more than he means. Look, Ursula, there is the White Cottage; that bow-window to the right belongs to your parlour. Now, my dear, I will open the gate, and you must just run up the path as quickly as you can, for you can hardly hold up an umbrella in this wind. You see the cottage does not boast of a carriage-drive.'

That odious Mr. Hamilton—or Dr. Hamilton, which was it? No wonder he looked like a Romish priest if he could make those Jesuitical remarks! I felt I almost hated him, but I resolved to banish him from my mind, as I ran past the dripping laurels that bordered the narrow path. The cottage door was open as soon as our fly had stopped at the gate; and by the light I could see the neat flower-borders and clipped yews, and a leafless wide-spreading tree with a seat under it. As I made my way into the porch, a very big man without his coat passed me with a civil 'good-evening.' I thought it must be Nathaniel, from his great height, and of course the prim-looking little widow in black, standing on the threshold, was Mrs. Barton. She had a nice, plaintive face, and spoke in a mild, deprecating voice.

'Good-evening, Mrs. Barton. What dreadful weather! I hope my wet boxes will not spoil the oilcloth.'

'That is easily wiped off, Miss Garston; but I am thinking the damp must have made you chilly. Come into the parlour: there is a fine rousing fire that will soon warm you. A fire is a deal of comfort on a wet, cool night. I have lighted one in your bedroom too.'

Evidently Mrs. Barton spared herself no trouble. I was a fire-worshipper, and loved to see the ruddy flame lighting up all the odd corners, and I was glad to think both my rooms would be cheerful. The parlour looked the picture of comfort; my piano was nicely placed, and the davenport, and the chair that I had sent with it. A large old-fashioned couch was drawn across the window, the round table had a white cloth on it, and the tea-tray and a cottage loaf were suggestive of a meal. The room was long and rather low, but the bow-window gave it a cosy aspect; one glance satisfied me that I had space for the principal part of my books, the rest could be put in my bedroom. When Mrs. Barton stirred the fire and lighted the candles the room looked extremely cheerful, especially as Tinker, the collie, had taken a fancy to the rug, and had stretched himself upon it after giving me a wag of his tail as a welcome. Mrs. Barton would hardly give me time to warm my hands before she begged me to follow her upstairs and take off my things while they brought in the luggage.

I found my bedroom had one peculiarity: you had to descend two broad steps before you entered it.

It was the same size as the parlour, and had a bow-window.

The furniture was unusually good—it had belonged to the previous lodger, Mrs. Meredith, who had bequeathed it to Mrs. Barton at her death.

I was thankful to see a pretty iron bedstead with a brass ring and blue chintz hangings, instead of the four-poster I had dreaded. There was a commodious cupboard and a handsome Spanish mahogany chest of drawers that Mrs. Barton pointed out with great pride. A bright fire burned in the blue-tiled fireplace; there was an easy-chair and a round table in the bow-window; a pleasant perfume of lavender-scented sheets pervaded the room, and a winter nosegay of red and white chrysanthemums was prettily arranged in a curious china bowl. I praised everything to Mrs. Barton's satisfaction, and then she went downstairs to see to the tea, first giving me the information that Nathaniel was coming upstairs with the big trunk, and would I tell him where to place it!

He entered the next moment, carrying the heavy trunk on his shoulder as easily as though it were a toy. He was a good-looking man, with a fair beard and a pair of honest blue eyes, and in spite of his size and strength—for he was a perfect son of Anak—seemed rather shy and retiring.

I left him loosening the straps of my box, and went downstairs to find Uncle Max.

He had made himself quite at home, and was sitting in the big easy-chair contemplating the fire.

'Well, Ursula, how do you like your rooms? Oh yes, there are two cups and saucers,' as I looked inquiringly at the table, 'because Mrs. Barton expects me to remain to tea. She is frying ham and eggs at the present moment; I hope you do not mind such homely country fare; but to-morrow you will be your own housekeeper.'

I assured Uncle Max that I had fallen in love with the White Cottage, and that I liked Mrs. Barton excessively, that my bedroom was especially cosy and was most comfortably furnished. 'You will see how pretty this room will look when I put up my new curtains and pictures,' I went on; 'it is a little bare at present, but it will soon have a more furnished appearance. I mean to be so busy to-morrow settling all my treasures.' And I spoke with so much animation that Uncle Max smiled at what he called my youthful enthusiasm.

'You may be as busy as you like all day,' he returned, in his pleasant way, 'so that you come up to the vicarage in the

afternoon to see Mrs. Drabble. Lawrence will be out: that fellow always is out,'—in a humorous tone of vexation. 'He makes himself so confoundedly agreeable that people are always asking him to dinner: he is terribly secular, is Lawrence, but he is young and will mend. Come up to the vicarage and dine with me, Ursula; I want you to taste Mrs. Drabble's pancakes: they are food for angels, as Lawrence always says.'

I accepted the invitation a little regretfully, for it seemed hard to leave my hermitage the first evening; but then Uncle Max had been so good to me that it would never do to disappoint him, and, as Mr. Tudor would be out, we should be very cosy together.

Mrs. Barton brought in the ham and eggs at this moment, and I sat down before my gay little tea-tray, marvelling secretly at the scarlet flamingo. There were plenty of homely delicacies on the table,—hot cakes and honey, and a basket of brown-and-yellow pippins. Uncle Max shook his head and pretended the hot cakes would ruin his digestion, but he enjoyed them all the same, and made an excellent meal.

We sat for a long time talking over the fire, chiefly of Lesbia and Jill, for he took a warm interest in them both; but about eight o'clock he remembered he had an engagement, and went off rather hurriedly, and I went upstairs and unpacked one of my boxes, and arranged my clothes in the chest of drawers and in the big, roomy cupboard.

When the church clock struck ten, I went down again in search of hot water. At the sound of my footstep, Mrs. Barton came out in the passage and invited me into the kitchen.

'There is only Nat there at his books,' she said, in her plaintive voice; 'he works late sometimes, though I tell him he uses up candle and firelight. Please make yourself at home, Miss Garston; we shall always be pleased to see you in our kitchen, when you like to pop in.'

'I hope I shall not come too often,' I returned, looking round at its bright snug appearance. A square of dark carpet covered part of the red-tiled floor; the round deal table in the centre was hidden under a crimson cloth, and two big elbow-chairs stood on each side of the wide fireplace. Nathaniel sat in one, with a little round table in front of him, covered with books and papers, with a small lamp for his own use. Mrs. Barton's workbox and mending-basket were on the centre table, the hearth had just been swept up, there was a smell of

hot bread, and a row of freshly-baked loaves were cooling on the dresser; the firelight shone on the gleaming pewter and brass utensils, and a great tabby cat sat purring on the elbow of Nathaniel's chair. I thought he seemed a little confused at my entrance, for he got up rather awkwardly and shuffled his papers together, so I took pity on his embarrassment, and only spoke to Mrs. Barton.

She took me into the little outer kitchen to show me where she did her cooking, and I asked her in a low voice what he was studying.

'He does a little of everything,' she said, with a sort of suppressed pride in her voice. 'Sometimes it is history, and oftener summing; he will have it that a man cannot have too much learning, and that he wants to improve himself; he is always fretting because he never had a chance when he was young, all along of his having to work when his poor father died, and so he is all for making up for lost time; sometimes Dr. Hamilton comes in and helps him with the Latin and—what do you call those figures?'

I suggested mathematics, and she nodded assent.

'Oh, Nat is a sight cleverer already than his master,' she went on. 'I am thinking that if he goes on learning more and more, that Mr. Roberts will be taking him into the business some day. Nat is a sort of foreman now, for his master thinks a deal of Nathaniel, and no wonder, for it is not only his learning, and his sitting up late, and getting up early in the winter's morning, and creeping downstairs without his boots so as not to wake me; for all he is such a good son; but I will say it, that there is not a young man in these parts that can beat Nat,' finished the little widow, in a broken voice.

I said I was glad to hear it, for she evidently expected me to say something; and then I asked how long Dr. Hamilton had given him lessons in Latin and mathematics. She was only too ready to tell me, and seemed pleased at my interest.

'Ever since Nat hurt his arm in the railway accident; and I will say that Dr. Hamilton brought him round in a wonderful way; he found him at his books one evening, and ordered him off to bed in a hurry; but when he came next time he had a long talk with Nat, and promised to give him an hour when he could spare it. Sometimes Nat goes up to Gladwyn, but oftener Dr. Hamilton drops in here; he has taken a fancy to our kitchen, he says; but that is his way of putting it.

There are plenty of folks who find fault with the doctor, and say he is not what he ought to be to his own flesh and blood; but I always will have it, and Nathaniel says the same, that the doctor has a fine character. Why, Nat swears by him.'

I was beginning to be afraid that Mrs. Barton would never arrive at a full stop,—she was a little like Mrs. Drabble in that; they were both discursive and parenthetical speakers, only Mrs. Drabble's meaning was more involved,—but before I had time to answer, a deep voice from the kitchen startled us.

'Mother, how long do you mean to keep Miss Garston in that cold, dark place? It is enough to starve her.' And at this rebuke Mrs. Barton hurried me into the front kitchen. I was tired by this time, and glad to bid them both good-night. And yet the widow's talk interested me. It was not Mr. Hamilton's fault that he had a face like a Romish priest; evidently he had his good points, like other people, in spite of his rudeness in laughing at me. But I could not—no, I could not tolerate that remark of his, 'that a girl would do anything to make herself talked about.' It was odious, cynical, utterly malevolent. I hoped Uncle Max would defer the introduction as long as possible. I never wished to know anything of Gladwyn or its master. These thoughts occupied me until I fell asleep; and then I dreamt of Jill.

Once or twice I woke in the night, disturbed by a low growl from Tinker, who slept in the passage. I heard afterwards that his dreams were always haunted by cats. He was an inveterate enemy to all the feline species, with the exception of Peter, the great tabby cat. They had long ago sworn an armistice, and, in his way, Tinker took a great deal of notice of Peter.

It was strange to look round the low cottage room by the flickering, fast-dying firelight. The rain still pattered on the garden paths. I was rather dismayed to find that it had not ceased the next morning; it is so pleasant to wake up in a fresh place and see the bright sunshine. This piece of good luck was denied me, however. When I looked out of my window I could only see dripping laurels and great pools in the gravel walks. The gray sky had not a break in it. I was glad when I was ready to go down to my parlour, for the fire and breakfast-table would look cheerful by comparison; and afterwards I would set to work so busily that I should not have time to notice the rain.

And so it proved; for until my early dinner—or rather

luncheon—was served, I was employed in unpacking and arranging my books and ornaments.

On my journeys to and fro I often paused at the low staircase window to reconnoitre the weather. There was no garden behind the cottage; a small gravelled yard, where Mrs. Barton kept her poultry and some rabbits belonging to Nathaniel, opened by a gate into a field. There was a cow-house there, and a white cow was standing rather disconsolately under some trees. I found out afterwards that both the field and the cow belonged to Mrs. Barton, so I could always rely on a good supply of sweet new milk.

Nathaniel had put up my book-shelves when I had sent them with the other furniture, so I had only to arrange the books. I made use, too, of some nails he had driven in for my pictures.

The parlour really looked very nice when I had finished; the new cream-coloured curtains were up, and I had tied them back with amber silk; two or three sunny little landscapes, and Charlie's portrait, a beautifully-painted photograph, hung on the walls; my favourite books were in their places, and the mantelpiece and the corner cupboards held some of the lovely old china that had belonged to mother. Aunt Philippa had wished me to leave it behind, as she feared it might be broken; but I liked to feast my eyes on the soft rich colours, and every piece was precious to me.

When I had disposed the furniture to the best advantage,—had placed my davenport and work-table and special chair in the bow-window, and had replaced the shabby red cloth by a handsome tapestry one,—I called Mrs. Barton to see the room.

She held up her hands in astonishment.

'Dear me, Miss Garston, it looks quite a different place. What will Nathaniel say when he sees it?—he is so fond of books and pretty things. It only wants sunshine and a bird-cage, and perhaps a geranium or two, to make it quite a bower May I make so bold, ma'am, as to ask who that pleasant-faced young gentleman is in the oak frame?'—but I think she was sorry that she had asked the question when I told her it was my twin-brother, now in heaven.

'That is where my husband and my dear little daughter both are,' she said, with moist eyes, as she turned away from the picture. 'Oh, there is a deal of trouble in the world, but you are young to know it, ma'am.' And then she looked kindly at me, and went away, to give Nathaniel his dinner.

CHAPTER VII

GILES HAMILTON, ESQ.

It was quite late in the afternoon when I put the last finishing-touches to my sitting-room, and it was already dusk when I left the cottage and walked quickly up the road that led to the vicarage.

My busy day had not tired me, and I should have enjoyed a solitary ramble in spite of the wet roads and dark November sky, only I knew Uncle Max would be waiting for me. A keen sense of independence, of liberty, of congenial work in prospective, seemed to tingle in my veins, as though new life were coursing through them. I was no longer trammelled by the constant efforts to move in other people's grooves. I was free to think my own thought and lead my own life without reproof or hindrance.

The vicarage was a red, irregular house, shut off from the road by a low wall, with a court-yard planted somewhat thickly with shrubs: the living-rooms were chiefly at the back of the house, and their windows looked out on a pleasant garden: a glass door in the hall opened on a broad gravel terrace bordered by standard rose-trees, and beyond lay a smooth green lawn almost as level as a bowling-green; a laurel hedge divided it from an extensive kitchen-garden, to which Uncle Max and Mr. Tudor devoted a great deal of their spare time and superfluous energies.

It was far too large a house for an unmarried man: the broad staircase and spacious rooms seemed to require the echo of children's voices. Uncle Max used to call it the barracks, but I think in his heart he liked the roomy emptiness; when

he was restless he would prowl up and down the wide landing from one unused room to another. It was an old-fashioned house, and more than one generation had grown up in it. Uncle Max was fond of telling me about his predecessors' histories. Two little children had died in the big nursery overlooking the garden. There was a little brown room where a *ci-devant* vicar had written his sermons, with a big cupboard in the wall where he hung his cassock. He had a grown-up family, but his wife was dead. One day he married again and brought home a slim, pale-faced girl—a certain Priscilla Howe—to be the mistress of his house. There were stories rife in the village that her step-children were too much for poor, pretty Priscilla; that while her husband wrote his sermons in the little brown room the young wife pined and moped in her green sitting-room.

Uncle Max found a picture of her one day in a garret where they stored apples; a faint musty smell clung to the canvas. 'Priscilla Howe' was written in one corner; there was a childish look on the small oval face; large melancholy eyes seemed appealing to one out of the canvas. She was dressed in a heavy white material like dimity, and held a few primroses between her fingers. What an innocent, pathetic little bride the stern-faced vicar must have brought home!

I read her epitaph afterwards when Uncle Max showed me her grave,—'Priscilla, wife of Ralph Combermere, aged twenty, and her infant son.' What a sad little inscription! But Uncle Max read something sadder still one day. A letter in faded ink was found in a corner of the same old garret, and the signature was 'Priscilla'; there was only one sentence legible in the whole, and to whom it was written remained a mystery: 'Trust me, dear love, that I shall ever do my duty, in spite of flaunts and jeers and most unkindly looks; and if God spares me health, which I cannot believe, He may yet right me in the eyes that no longer look at me with fondness.'

Poor Priscilla! so her husband had ceased to love her. No wonder the poor child dwindled and pined among 'the flaunts and jeers and most unkindly looks' of her step-children. One could imagine her clasping her baby to her sad heart as she closed her eyes to the bitter misunderstanding of this life. 'Where the weary are at rest,'—they might have written those words upon her tomb.

The thought of Priscilla used to haunt me when I roamed

about the passages on windy days; the old garret especially seemed haunted by her memory. Uncle Max once said to me that he could have constructed a romance out of her poor little history. 'She came from a place called Ecclesbourne Hall,' he said, one day. 'She was an heiress; old Ralph Combermere knew what he was about when he transplanted the pale primrose. Do you know, Ursula, this room is supposed to be haunted? And one of the maids told me seriously that Mistress Combermere walks here on windy nights with her babe in her arms. Fancy such a report in an English vicarage!'

When I reached the house the little maid who opened the door informed me that Uncle Max was in his study: it was a large room with a bow-window overlooking the garden, and I knew Uncle Max never used any other room except for his meals. I had volunteered to announce myself. I was never formal with Max, so I knocked at the door, and, without waiting to hear his voice in reply, marched in without ceremony.

But the next moment I stood discomfited on the threshold, for instead of Uncle Max's familiar face I saw a dark, closely-cropped head bending over the table as though searching for something, and the ruddy firelight reflected the broad shoulders and hairless profile of the obnoxious Mr. Hamilton.

My first idea was to escape, and my fingers were already on the door-handle, when he turned abruptly and saw me. 'I beg your pardon,' coming towards me and speaking in the deep peculiar voice I had already heard. 'I was hunting for the matches that Cunliffe always mislays. You are Miss Garston, are you not? I was told to expect you.' And then he actually shook hands with me in an off-hand way.

I am not generally devoid of presence of mind, but at that moment I behaved as awkwardly as a school-girl. If I could only have thought of some excuse for leaving him,—an errand or a message to Mrs. Drabble; but no form of words would occur to me. I could only mutter an apology for my abrupt entrance, and ask after Uncle Max, stammering with confusion all the time, and then take the chair he was placing for me, while he renewed his search for the match-box.

'Oh, Cunliffe has only gone down to the village to post his letters: he will be back in a few minutes. Ah! here are the matches. Now we shall be able to see each other.' And he coolly lighted Uncle Max's reading-lamp and two candles, and

stirred the fire with such a vigorous hand that the huge lump of coal splintered into fragments.

'There; I do like a mighty blaze. Take that newspaper, Miss Garston, if the flame scorches your face. I know young ladies are afraid of their complexions.' Why need he have said that, as though my brown skin were Sara's pretty pink cheeks? 'Why do you not throw off your wraps if the room be too hot?' And he spoke so imperatively that I actually obeyed him, and got rid of my hat and ulster, which he deposited on the couch.

I did not like the look of Mr. Hamilton any better than I had liked it yesterday. His dark, smoothly-shaven face was not to my taste: it looked stern and forbidding. He had a low forehead, and there was a hard set look about the mouth, and the eyes were almost disagreeable in their keenness.

Perhaps I was prejudiced, but he looked to me like a man who rarely laughed, and who would take a pleasure in saying bitter things; his voice was not unpleasant, but it had a peculiar depth in it, and now and then there was an odd break in it that was almost a hesitation.

'Well,' he said, looking full at me, but, I was sure, not in the least wishful to set me at my ease, 'I suppose I ought to introduce myself. My name is Hamilton.'

I bowed. I certainly did not think it necessary that I should tell him that I was aware of that fact.

'We met yesterday, when you were good enough to put up with Nap's company. I was half disposed to introduce myself then: only I feared you would be shocked at such a piece of unconventionality; young ladies have such strict ideas of decorum.'

'And very properly so, too,' I put in severely, for my irritation was getting the better of my nervousness. I could not bear the tone in which he said 'young ladies.' I felt convinced he had an antipathy to the whole sex.

'Our skies were very uncivil in their welcome,' he went on, quite disregarding my remark: 'it was the wettest night we have had for an age. I was quite savage when I found the horses had been taken out of their warm stables: the coachman was an ass, as I told him.'

'You scolded him somewhat severely.'

'Ah! did you hear me?' smiling a little at that, as though he were amused. 'I am afraid I speak my mind pretty freely,

in spite of bystanders. Well, Miss Garston, so I hear you have come down as a sort of female Quixote among us. Heathfield is to be the scene of your mission.'

I was so angry at the tone in which he said this that I made no reply. What right had a perfect stranger to meddle in my business? It was all Uncle Max's fault; if he had only held his tongue.

'Cunliffe was up at Gladwyn the other night,' he continued in the same off-hand way, 'and he told us all about it.'

'I am sorry to hear it,' very stiffly.

'Sorry! Why? Good deeds ought to be talked about, ought they not, *pro bono publico*, eh? Why not, Miss Garston?'

'Good intentions are not deeds.'

'True; you have me there. I suppose you think you must not reckon on your chickens before they are hatched; the *pro bono publico* scheme is not properly hatched yet, except in theory. I am afraid I shall make you angry if I tell you I was rather amused at the whole thing.'

'I am glad to afford you amusement, Mr. Hamilton.'

'Ah, I see you are deeply offended; what a pity, and in five minutes too! That comes of my unfortunate habit of speaking my mind. Let me follow this out. I am afraid Cunliffe has been a traitor; that fellow is not reliable: no parsons are. Let me hear what you have against me, Miss Garston. I have spoken against your pet theory, and you are aggrieved in consequence.'

He spoke in a half-jesting manner, but his ironical voice challenged me.

I felt I detested him, and he should know why.

'I expected to be misunderstood,' I returned coldly, 'but hardly to be accused of hysterical goodness. To be sure, a girl will do anything nowadays to get herself talked about!'

'Oh,' in a low voice, 'that rascal! But I will be even with him. How many more of my speeches did Cunliffe repeat?'

'Oh, I had heard enough,' I replied hastily. 'Does it not strike you as a little hard, Mr. Hamilton, that one should be judged beforehand in this harsh manner?—that because some girls are full of vagaries, the whole sex must be condemned?'

'Oh, if you put it in that cut-and-dried way, I must plead guilty: in fact, I should owe you some sort of apology, only'—with a stress on the word—'my speech was not intended for the

house-top. I am rather a sceptic about female missions, Miss Garston, and do not always measure my words when I am discussing abstract theories with a friend. In my opinion Cunliffe is the one you ought to blame, though if the speech rankles I will take my share.'

'I certainly wish you had not said it, Mr. Hamilton.'

'There, now,'—in an injured voice,—'that is the way you treat my handsome apology, and I am not a man ever to own myself in the wrong, mind you. What does it matter, may I ask, what I think of girls in the abstract? I had not met you, Miss Garston, or discussed the subject in its bearings: so where may the offence lie? Of course you have no answer ready; of course you have taken offence where none is meant. This is so like a woman—to undertake to renovate society, and lose her temper at the first adverse word.'

He was looking at me with a peculiar but not unkindly smile as he spoke; in fact, his expression was almost pleasant; but I was too much prejudiced to be softened. I did not care in the least what he thought of my temper; I was quite sure he had one of his own.

'No one likes to meet discouragement on the threshold,' I answered curtly.

'Not if it comes out with timbrels and dances, like Jephtha's daughter, to be sacrificed: that was discouragement on the threshold with a vengeance. I was always sorry for that old fellow. Well, *apropos* of that touching remark,—which, by the way, is exquisitely feminine,—supposing we strike a truce. I daresay you look upon me as an interfering stranger; but the fact is, I am the poor folk's doctor down here; so you cannot work without me. That alters the case, eh?'—with a smile meant to be propitiatory, but really too triumphant for my taste.

'Under those circumstances I could wish that you had less narrow views of women's work,' I returned, with some warmth.

He opened his eyes so widely at this that at any other moment I should have been amused.

'By all that is wonderful, it is the first time I have been accused of narrowness.' And here he gave a gruff little laugh. 'I think I had better leave you alone, Miss Garston, and label you "dangerous." There is a hot sparkle in your eyes that warns me to keep off the premises. "Trespassers will be taken up." I begin to feel uncomfortable. Cunliffe has put me *en*

parole, and I dare not break bounds. Can you manage to sit in the same room a little longer with such a heretic?'

'Heretics can be converted.'

He shrugged his shoulders at this.

'Not such a hardened sceptic as myself. Now, look here, Miss Garston. I will say something civil. I believe you are in earnest; so it shall be *pax* between us; and I will promise not to thwart you. As for women's mission in general, I believe their principal mission is not to stop at home and mind their own business; in fact, home and homely duties are the last straws that break the back of the emancipated woman.' And with these audacious words Mr. Hamilton stirred the fire again with prodigious energy. Happily, Uncle Max came into the room at that moment; so I was spared any reply.

Max must have thought that I was suspiciously glad to see him, for he looked from one to the other rather anxiously.

'Sorry to be so late, Ursula; but I met Pardoe, and he entrapped me into an argument. Well, how have you and my friend Hamilton got on together?'

I turned away without answering, but Mr. Hamilton responded, in a melancholy voice—

'I have been suppressed, like the dormouse in Alice's teapot. There is very little left of me. I had no idea your niece had such a taste for argument, Cunliffe. I take it rather unkindly that I was not warned off the track.'

'So you two have been quarrelling.' And Uncle Max looked a little vexed. 'What a fellow you are, Hamilton, for stroking a person the wrong way! Of course Ursula has believed all your cross-grained remarks?'

'Swallowed them whole and entire; and a fit of moral indigestion is the result. Well, I must be going; but first let me administer a palliative, Miss Garston. What time do you have breakfast? If it be before ten, I shall be happy to introduce you to a very eligible case.'

I would have given much to dispense with Mr. Hamilton's patronage; but under the circumstances it would have been absurd to refuse his offer. I could not sacrifice my work to my temper; but I recognised with a sinking heart that Mr. Hamilton would cross my daily path. The idea was as delightful to me as the anticipation of a daily east wind. I restrained myself, however, and briefly mentioned that I would be ready by nine.

'Oh, that is an hour too early: I will call for you at ten. Let me see, you are at the White Cottage. You are not curious about your first patient; in that you are not a true daughter of Eve. Well, good-bye, Miss Garston; good-bye, Cunliffe.' And he left the room without shaking hands with me again.

Uncle Max followed him out into the hall, and they stood so long talking that I lost patience, and went into the kitchen to see Mrs. Drabble.

She received me in a resigned way, as usual, and talked without taking breath once while she buttered the hot cakes and prepared the tea-tray. I understood her to say that Mr. Tudor's collars were her chief cares in life; that no young gentleman she had ever known was so hard to please in the matter of starch; that her master was a lamb in comparison; and did I not think he was looking ill and overworking himself?

I had some difficulty in finding out to whom she was alluding, but I imagined she meant her master, who was certainly looking a little thin, and then she went off on another tack.

'Folks seem mighty curious about you, Miss Ursula; people do say that only a young lady crossed in love would think of doing such an out-of-the-way thing as putting up at the White Cottage and nursing poor people. There was Rebecca Saunders, —you know Rebecca at the post-office,—she said to me last night, "So your young lady has come, Mrs. Drabble; the vicar was at the station, I hear, and Dr. Hamilton came down by the same train: wasn't that curious, now? I am thinking she must be a mighty independent sort of person to take this work on her; there has been trouble somewhere, take my word for it, for it is not in young folks' nature to go in for work and no play."'

'Oh, I mean to play as well as work,' I returned, laughing. 'Don't tell me any more, Mrs. Drabble; people will talk in a village, but I would rather not hear what they say.' And then I went back to the study and made tea for Uncle Max, and tried to pretend that I felt quite myself, and was not the least uneasy in my mind,—as though I could deceive Max.

'Well, Ursula,' he said, shaking his head at me, 'did Hamilton or Mrs. Drabble give you those hot cheeks?'

'Oh, Uncle Max,' I returned hastily, 'I am so sorry Mr. Hamilton is your friend.'

'Why so, little she-bear?'

'Because—because—I detest him: he is the most disagreeable, insufferable, domineering person I have ever met.'

'Candid; but then you were always outspoken, my dear. Now, shall I tell you what this disagreeable, insufferable, domineering person said to me in the hall?'

'Oh, nothing he said will make any difference in my opinion, I assure you.'

'Possibly not, but it is too good to be lost. He said, "That little girl actually believes in herself and her work; it is quite refreshing to meet with such *naïveté* nowadays. Ursula did you call her? Well, the name just suits her." How do you like that, poor little bear?'

'I like it as well as I liked all Mr. Hamilton's speeches. Max, do you really care for that odious man? Must I be civil to him?'

'Indeed, I hope you will be civil, Ursula,' replied Uncle Max, in an alarmed voice. 'My dear, Giles Hamilton, Esq., is my most influential parishioner; he is rich; he doctors all my poor people *gratis*, bullies them one moment, and does them a good turn in the next; he is clever, kind-hearted, and has no end of good points, and, though he is eccentric and has plenty of faults, we chum together excellently, and I am very intimate with his people.'

'His people—who are they?' I asked irritably.

'Oh, it is a queer household up at Gladwyn,' returned Max, rather uneasily. 'Hamilton has a cousin living with him, as well as his two sisters; her name is Darrell,—Etta Darrell; she is a stylish-looking woman, about five-and-thirty; one never knows a lady's age exactly.'

'Are his sisters very young, then? Does Miss Darrell manage the house?'

'Yes. How could you guess that?' looking at me in surprise. 'Gladys, Miss Hamilton, is about three-and-twenty, but she is very delicate; the younger one, Elizabeth, is two years younger; they are Hamilton's half-sisters,—his father married twice: that accounts for a good deal.'

'How do you mean,—accounts for a good deal, Max?'

'Why people say that Hamilton doesn't always get on with his sisters,' he returned reluctantly: 'there are often misunderstandings in families,—want of harmony, and that sort of thing. Mind, I do not say it is true.'

'But you are so often at Gladwyn, you ought to know, Max.'

'Yes, of course; and now and then I have seen Hamilton a little stern with his sisters; he is rather irritable by nature. I don't quite understand things myself, but I have got it into my head that they would be happier without Miss Darrell; she is a splendid manager, but it puts Miss Hamilton out of her right place.'

'But she is an invalid, you say?'

'No, not an invalid, only very delicate, and a little morbid; not quite what a girl ought to be. You could do some good there, Ursula,' rather eagerly. 'Miss Hamilton has no friends of her own age; she is reserved,—peculiar. You might be a comfort to her; you are sympathetic, sensible, and have known trouble yourself. I should like to see you use your influence there.'

'I will try, if you wish it, Max. And her name is Gladys?'

'Yes, Gladys, of Gladwyn,' he returned, with a smile, but I thought he said it with rather a singular intonation, but it had a musical sound, and I repeated it again to myself,—'Gladys, of Gladwyn.'

CHAPTER VIII

NEW BROOMS SWEEP CLEAN

We were interrupted just then by Mrs. Drabble, who came in for the tea-things, and, as usual, held a long colloquy with her master on sundry domestic affairs. When she had at last withdrawn, Uncle Max did not resume the subject. I was somewhat disappointed at this, and in spite of my strong antipathy to Mr. Hamilton I wanted to hear more about his sisters.

He disregarded my hints, however, and began talking to me about my work.

'Do you know anything about the family Mr. Hamilton mentioned?' I asked, rather eagerly.

'Oh yes; Mary Marshall's is a very sad case; she has seven children, not one of them old enough to work for himself; and she is dying, poor creature, of consumption. Her husband is a navvy, and he is at work at Lewes; I believe he is pretty steady, and sends the greater part of his wages to his wife, but there are too many mouths to feed to allow of comforts; his old blind mother lives with them. I believe the neighbours are kind and helpful, and Peggy, the eldest child, is a sharp little creature, but you can imagine the miserable condition of such a home.'

'Yes, indeed.' And I shuddered as I recalled many a sad scene in my father's home.

'I have sent in a woman once or twice to clean up the place; and Mrs. Drabble has made excellent beef-tea, but the last lot turned sour from being left in the hot kitchen one night, and the cat upset the basin of calf's-foot jelly,—at least

the children said so. I go there myself, because Tudor says the air of the place turns him sick: he looked as white as a ghost after his last visit, and declared he was poisoned with foul air.'

'I daresay he was right, Max; poor people have such an objection to open their windows.'

'I believe you there. I have talked myself nearly hoarse on that subject. Hamilton and I propose giving lectures in the schoolroom on domestic hygiene. There is a fearful want of sanitary knowledge in women belonging to the lower class; want of cleanliness, want of ventilation, want of whitewashing, are triple evils that lead to the most lamentable results. We cannot get people to understand the common laws of life; the air of their rooms may be musty, stagnant, and corrupt, and yet they are astonished if their children have an attack of scarlet fever or diphtheria.'

I commended the notion of the lectures warmly, and asked with whom the idea had originated.

'Oh, Hamilton, of course: he is the moving spirit of everything. We have planned the whole thing out. There is to be a lecture every Friday evening; the first is to be on household hygiene, the sanitary condition of houses, ventilation, cleanliness, etc. In the second lecture Hamilton will speak of the laws of health, self-management, personal cleanliness, to be followed by a few simple lectures on nursing, sick-cookery, and the treatment of infantile diseases. We want all the mothers to attend. Do you think it a good idea, Ursula?'

'It is an excellent one,' I returned reluctantly, for I grudged the praise to Mr. Hamilton. He could benefit his fellow-creatures, and give time and strength and energy to the poor sick people, and yet sneer at me civilly when I wanted to do the same, just because I was a woman. Perhaps Max was disappointed with my want of enthusiasm, for he ceased talking of the lectures, and said he had some more letters to write before dinner, and during the rest of the evening, though we discussed a hundred different topics, Mr. Hamilton's name was not again mentioned.

Uncle Max walked with me to the gate of the White Cottage, and bade me a cheerful good-night.

'I like to feel you are near me, Ursula,' he said, quite affectionately; 'an old bachelor like myself gets into a groove, and the society of a vigorous young woman, brimful of philanthropy

and crotchets, will rub me up and do me good; one goes to sleep sometimes,' he finished, rather mournfully, and then he walked away in the darkness, and I stood for a minute to watch him.

It seemed to me that Max was a little different this evening. He was always kind, always cheerful; he never wrapped himself up in gloomy reserve like other people, however depressed or ill at ease he might be; but Mrs. Drabble was right, he was certainly thinner, and there was an anxious careworn look about his face when he was not speaking. I was certain, too, that his cheerfulness and ready flow of conversation were not without effort. I had asked him once if he were quite well, and he had looked at me in evident astonishment.

'Perfectly well, thank you,—in a state of rude health. Nothing ever ails me. Why do you ask?' But I evaded this question, for I knew Max hated to be watched; and, after all, what right had I to intrude into his private anxieties? doubtless he had plenty of these, like other men. The management of a large parish was on his shoulders, and he was too conscientious and hard-working to spare himself; but somehow the shadow lying deep down in Max's honest brown eyes haunted me as I unlatched the cottage door.

I heard Nathaniel's voice in the kitchen, and went in to bid him and his mother good-night. Mrs. Barton was not there, however, but, to my chagrin, Mr. Hamilton occupied her seat. He looked up with a rather quizzical glance as I entered; he and Nathaniel had the round table between them, strewn with books and papers; Nathaniel was writing, and Mr. Hamilton was sitting opposite to him.

'I beg your pardon,' I said hurriedly. 'I thought Mrs. Barton was here.'

'She has gone to bed,' returned Mr. Hamilton coolly: 'my friend Nathaniel and I are hard at work, as you see. Do you know anything of mathematics, Miss Garston?—no, you shake your head——' I do not know what more he would have said, but I escaped with a quick good-night.

As I went upstairs I made a resolution to avoid the kitchen in future: I might at any moment stumble upon Mr. Hamilton. I had forgotten that he gave Nathaniel lessons sometimes in the evening. What a ubiquitous mortal this man appeared,—here, there, and everywhere! It had given me rather a shock to see him so comfortably domiciled in Mrs. Barton's cosy kitchen;

he looked as much at home there as in Uncle Max's study. How bright Nathaniel had looked as he raised his head to bid me good-night! I was obliged to confess that they had seemed as happy as possible.

It was very late when he left the cottage; I was just sinking off to sleep when I heard his voice under my window. Tinker heard it too, and barked, and then the gate shut with a sudden sharp click and all was still. Nathaniel must have crept up to bed in his stocking-feet, as they say in some parts, for I never heard him pass my door.

I was glad to be greeted by sunshine the next morning; the day seemed to smile on my new work like an unuttered benison as I went down to my solitary breakfast. I resolved that nothing Mr. Hamilton could say should damp or put me out of temper, and then I sat down and read a sad rambling letter from Jill, which was so quaint and original, in spite of its lugubriousness, that it made me smile.

I was standing by the door, caressing Tinker, who was in a frolicking mood this morning, when I saw Mr. Hamilton cross the road; he wore a dark tweed suit and a soft felt hat,—a costume that did not suit him in the least; he held open the gate for me, and made a sign that I should join him. As I approached without hurrying myself in the least, he looked inquiringly at the basket I carried.

'I hope you do not intend to pauperise your patients,' was his first greeting.

'Oh no,' was my reply, but I did not volunteer any information as to the contents of the basket. There was certainly a jar of beef-tea that Mrs. Drabble had given me, and a few grapes; but the little store of soap, soda, fine rags, and the two or three clean towels and cloths would have surprised him a little, though he might have understood the meaning of the neat housewife.

'I am glad you wear print dresses,' was his next remark; 'they are proper for a nurse. Stuff gowns that do not wash are abominations. I am taking you to a very dirty place, Miss Garston, but what can you expect when there are seven children under thirteen years of age and the mother is dying? She was a clean capable body when she was up; it is hard for her to see the place like a pig-sty now. Old Mrs. Marshall is blind, and as helpless as the children.' He spoke abruptly, but not without feeling.

'The neighbours are good to them, Uncle Max tells me.'

'Oh yes; they come in and tidy up a bit,—that is their expression; now and then they wash the baby or take off a batch of dirty clothes, but they have their own homes and children. I tell my patient that she would be far more comfortable in a hospital; but she says she cannot leave the children, she would rather die at home. That is what they all say.'

'But the poor creatures mean what they say, Mr. Hamilton.'

'Oh, but it is all nonsense!' he returned irritably. 'She can do nothing for the children; she cannot have a moment's quiet or a moment's comfort, with all those grimy noisy creatures rushing in and out. I found her sitting up in bed yesterday, in danger of breaking a blood-vessel through coughing, because one of the imps had fallen down and cut his head and she was trying to plaster it.'

'Her husband ought to be with her,' I said, somewhat indignantly.

'He is on a job somewhere, and cannot come home; they must have bread to eat, and he must work. This is the house,' pointing to a low white cottage at the end of a long straggling street of similar houses; two or three untidy-looking children were playing in the front garden with some oyster-shells and a wooden horse without a head. One little white-headed urchin clapped his hands when he saw Mr. Hamilton, and a pretty little girl with a very dirty face ran up to him and clasped him round the knee.

''As 'oo any pennies to-day?' she lisped.

'No nonsense; run away, children,' he said, in a rough voice that did not in the least alarm them, for they scampered after us into the porch until an elder girl, with a year-old baby in her arms, met us on the threshold and scolded them away.

Mr. Hamilton shook a big stick at them.

'I shall give no pennies to children with dirty faces. Well, Peggy, how is mother? Have the boys gone to school, both of them? That is right. This is the lady who is coming to look after mother.'

Here Peggy dropped a courtesy, and said, 'Yes, sir,' and 'yes please, mum.'

'Mind you do all she tells you. Now out of my way. I want to speak to your grandmother a moment, and then I will come into the other room.'

I followed him into the untidy, miserable-looking kitchen.

An old woman was sitting by the fire with an infant in her arms, we found out that it belonged to the neighbour who was washing out some things in the yard. She came in by and by, clattering over the stones in her thick clogs,—a brisk, untidy-looking young woman, and looked at me curiously as she took her baby.

'I must be going home now, granny,' she said, in a loud, cross humoured voice. 'Peggy can rinse out the few things I've left.'

Elspeth had a pleasant, weather-beaten face, only it looked sunken and pale, and the poor blind eyes had a pathetic, wistful look in them. To my surprise, she looked neat and clean. I had yet to learn the slow martyrdom the poor soul had endured during the last few months in that squalid, unsuitable household. To her, cleanliness was next to godliness. She had brought up a large family well and thriftily, and now in her old age and helplessness her life had no comfort in it. I was rather surprised to see Mr. Hamilton shake the wrinkled hand heartily.

'Well, Elspeth, what news of your son? Is he likely to come home soon?'

'Nay, doctor,' in a faint old treble: 'Andrew cannot leave his job for two or three months to come. He is terrible down-hearted about poor Mary. Ay, she has been a good wife to him and the bairns; but look at her now! Poor thing! poor thing!'

'We must all dree our weird. You are a canny Scotch-woman, and know what that means. Come, you must cheer up, for I have brought a young lady with me who is going to put your daughter-in-law a little more comfortable and see after her from time to time.'

'Ay, but that is cheering news,' returned Elspeth; and one of the rare tears of old age stole down her withered cheek. 'My poor Mary! she is patient, and never complains; but the good Lord is laying a heavy cross on her.'

'That is true,' muttered Mr. Hamilton, and then he said, in a business-like tone, 'Now for the patient, Miss Garston'; and as he led the way across the narrow passage we could hear the hard, gasping cough of the sick woman.

Peggy, with the baby still in her arms, was trying to stir a black, cindery fire, that was filling the room with smoke. The child was crying, and the poor invalid was sitting up in bed

nearly suffocated by her cough. The great four-post bed blocked up the little window. The remains of a meal were still on the big round table. Some clothes were drying by the hearth; a thin tortoise-shell cat was licking up a stream of milk that was filtering slowly across the floor, in the midst of jugs, cans, a broken broom, some children's toys, and two or three boots. The bed looked as though it had not been made for days; the quilt and valance were deplorably dirty; but the poor creature herself looked neat and clean, and her hair was drawn off from her sunken cheeks and knotted carefully at the back of her head. Mr. Hamilton uttered an exclamation of impatience when he saw the smoke, and almost snatched the poker out of Peggy's hands.

'Take the child away,' he said angrily. 'Miss Garston, if you can find some paper and wood in this infernal confusion, I shall be obliged to you: this smoke must be stopped.'

I found the broken lid of a box that split up like tinder, and Peggy brought me an old newspaper, and then I stood by while Mr. Hamilton skilfully manipulated the miserable fire.

'All these ashes must be removed,' he said curtly, as he rose with blackened hands: 'the whole fireplace is blocked up with them.' And then he went to the pump and washed his hands, while I sent Peggy after him with a nice clean towel from my basket. While he was gone I stepped up to the bed and said a word or two to poor Mrs. Marshall.

She must have been a comely creature in her days of health, but she was fearfully wasted now. The disease was evidently running its course; as she lay there exhausted and panting, I knew her lease of life would not be long.

'It was the smoke,' she panted. 'Peggy is young: she muddles over the fire. Last night it went out, and she was near an hour getting it to light.'

'It is burning beautifully now,' I returned; and then Mr. Hamilton came back and began to examine his patient professionally. I was surprised to find that his abrupt manner left him; he spoke to Mrs. Marshall so gently, and with such evident sympathy, that I could hardly believe it was the same person; her wan face seemed to light up with gratitude; but when he turned to me to give some directions for her treatment he spoke with his old dryness.

'I shall be here about the same time to-morrow,' he finished; and then he nodded to us both, and went away.

'Mrs. Marshall,' I said, as I warmed the beef-tea with some difficulty in a small broken pipkin, 'do you know of any strong capable girl who would clean up the place a little for me?'

'There is Weatherley's eldest girl Hope still at home,' she replied, after a moment's hesitation, 'but her mother will not let her work without pay. She is a poor sort of neighbour, is Susan Weatherley, and is very niggardly in helping people.'

'Of course I should pay Hope,' I answered decidedly; and when the beef-tea was ready I called Peggy and sent her on my errand. One glance at the place showed me that I could do nothing for my patient without help. Happily, I had seen some sheets drying by the kitchen fire, but they would hardly be ready for us before the evening; but when Mrs. Marshall had taken her beef-tea I covered her up and tried to smooth the untidy quilt. Then, telling her that we were going to make her room a little more comfortable, I pinned up my dress and enveloped myself in a holland apron ready for work.

Peggy came back at this moment with a big, strapping girl of sixteen, who looked strong and willing. She was evidently not a woman of words, but she grinned cheerful acquiescence when I set her to work on the grate, while I cleared the table and carried out all the miscellaneous articles that littered the floor.

Mrs. Marshall watched us with astonished eyes. 'Oh dear! oh dear!' I heard her say to herself, 'and a lady too!' but I took no notice.

I sent Hope once or twice across to her mother for various articles we needed,—black lead, a scrubbing-brush, some house flannel and soft soap,—and when she had finished the grate I set her to scrub the floor, as it was black with dirt. I was afraid of the damp boards for my patient, but I covered her up as carefully as possible, and pinned some old window-curtains across the bed. Neglect and want of cleanliness had made the air of the sick-room so fetid and poisonous that one could hardly breathe it with safety.

Now and then I looked in the other room and spoke a cheerful word to granny. Peggy was doing her best for the children, but the poor baby seemed very fretful. Towards noon two rough-headed boys made their appearance and began clamouring for their dinner. The same untidy young woman whom I had seen before came clattering up the yard again in

her clogs and helped Peggy spread great slices of bread and treacle for the hungry children, and warmed some food for the baby. I saw granny trying to eat a piece of bread and dripping that they gave her and then lay it down without a word: no wonder her poor cheeks were so white and sunken.

Mrs. Drabble had promised me some more beef-tea, so I warmed a cupful for granny and broke up a slice of stale bread in it: it was touching to see her enjoyment of the warm food. The eldest boy, Tim, was nearly eleven years old, and looked a sharp little fellow, so I set him to clean up the kitchen with Peggy and make things a little tidier, and promised some buns to all the children who had clean faces and hands at tea-time.

I left Hope still at work when I went up to the White Cottage to eat some dinner. Mrs. Barton had made a delicate custard-pudding, which I carried off for the invalid's and granny's supper. My young healthy appetite needed no tempting, and my morning's work had only whetted it. I did not linger long in my pretty parlour, for a heavy task was before me. I was determined the sick-room should have a different appearance the next morning.

I sent Hope to her dinner while I washed and made my patient comfortable. The room felt fresher and sweeter already; a bright fire burned in the polished grate; Hope had scoured the table and wiped the chairs, and the dirty quilt and valance had been sent to Mrs. Weatherley's to be washed. When Hope returned, and the sheets were aired, we re-made the bed. I had sent a message early to Mrs. Drabble begging for some of the lending blankets and a clean coloured quilt, which she had sent down by a boy. The scarlet cover looked so warm and snug that I stood still to admire the effect; poor Mary fairly cried when I laid her back on her pillow.

'It feels all so clean and heavenly,' she sobbed; 'it is just a comfort to lie and see the room.'

'I mean granny to come and have her tea here,' I said, for I was longing for the dear old woman to have her share of some of the comfort; and I had just led her in and put her in the big shiny chair by the fire, when Uncle Max put his head in and looked at us.

'Just so,' he said, nodding his head, and a pleased expression came into his eyes. 'Bravo, Ursula! Tudor won't know the place again. How you must have worked, child!' And then he came in and talked to the sick woman.

I had taken a cup of tea standing, for I was determined not to go home and rest until I left for the night. I could not forget the poor fretful baby, and, indeed, all the children were miserably neglected. I made up my mind that Hope and I would wash the poor little creatures and put them comfortably to bed. My first day's work was certainly exceptionally hard, but it would make my future work easier.

The baby was a pale, delicate little creature, very backward for its age; it left off fretting directly I took it in my lap, and began staring at me with its large blue eyes. Hope had just filled the large tub, and the children were crowding round it with evident amusement, when Uncle Max came in. He contemplated the scene with twinkling eyes.

'"There was an old woman who lived in a shoe,"' he began humorously. 'My dear Ursula, do you mean to say you are going to wash all those children? The tub looks suggestive, certainly.'

I nodded.

'Who would have believed in such an overplus of energy? Hard work certainly agrees with you.' And then he went out laughing, and we set to work, and then Hope and I carried in the children by detachments, that the poor mother might see the clean rosy faces. I am afraid we had to bribe Jock, the youngest boy, for he evidently disliked soap and water.

Peggy and the baby slept in the mother's room; there was a little bed in the corner for them. I did not leave until granny had been taken upstairs and poor tired Peggy was fast asleep with the baby beside her.

The room looked so comfortable when I turned for a last peep. I had drawn the round table to the bed, and left the night-light and cooling drink beside the sick woman; she was propped up with pillows, and her breathing seemed easier. When I bade her good-night, and told her I should be round early in the morning, she said, 'Then it will be the first morning I shall not dread to wake. Thank you kindly, dear miss, for all you have done'; and her soft brown eyes looked at me gratefully.

CHAPTER IX

THE FLAG OF TRUCE

It could not be denied that I was extremely tired as I walked down the dark road; but in spite of fatigue my heart felt lighter than it had done since Charlie's death, and the warm glow from the window of my little parlour seemed to welcome me, it looked so snug and bright. My low chair was drawn to the fire, a sort of tea-supper was awaiting me, and Mrs. Barton came out of the kitchen as soon as I had lifted the latch, to ask what she could do for me.

The first words surprised me greatly. Mr. Hamilton had called late in the afternoon, and had seemed somewhat surprised to hear I was still at the cottage, but he had left no message, and Mrs. Barton had no idea what he wanted with me.

I was half inclined to think that he had another case ready for me, but I had done my day's work and refused to think of the morrow. The first volume of *Kingsley's Life* was lying on the little table: I had brought it from the vicarage the preceding evening. I passed a delicious hour in my luxurious chair, and went to bed reluctantly that I might be fit for the next day's fatigue.

As soon as I had breakfasted the next morning and read my letters, a chatty one from Sara and an affectionate note from Lesbia, I went down to the cottage.

I found my patient a little easier; she had passed a better night, and seemed, on the whole, more cheerful. Hope had arrived, and was scrubbing the kitchen, as I had enjoined her. Baby seemed poorly and fretful. I gave her in charge of Peggy, and set myself to the work of putting my patient and the

sick-room in order, after which I intended to wash the baby and see after granny's and the children's dinner.

I had just brushed up the hearth and put the kettle to boil, when Mr. Hamilton's shadow crossed the window, and the next moment he was in the room.

I was sure that a half-smile of approbation came to his lips as he looked round the room; he lifted his eyebrows as though in surprise as he noticed everything,—the neat hearth, white boards, and bright window, and lastly the comfortable appearance of the bed, with its scarlet quilt and clean sheets.

'This is quite a transformation-scene, Miss Garston,' he said, in an approving tone. 'No wonder you were not at home in the afternoon. My patient looks cheery too: one would think I had set the fairy Order to work.' I felt that this was meant for high praise, and I received it graciously. I knew I had worked well and achieved wonders; but then I had Hope's strong arms to help me: it had been straightforward work, too, with no complication: any charwoman could have done it as well. I was sorry that his commendation set Mrs. Marshall's tongue going; she became so voluble, in spite of her cough, that I was obliged to enforce silence.

Mr. Hamilton's visit was very brief. I asked him to prescribe for the baby, but he said nothing ailed it in particular; it had always been sickly, and had been so neglected of late, most likely sour food had been given it. Mrs. Tyler, the next-door neighbour, who had looked after it, was a thoughtless body. 'You must take it in hand yourself, Miss Garston,' he finished; 'keep it warm and clean, and see the food properly prepared: that will be better than any medicine.' And then he went off with his usual abruptness, only I saw him stop at the gate to give pennies to Janie and little Jock.

There was still so much to do that I determined to spend the whole day at the cottage. I sent off all the dirty things for Mrs. Tyler to wash at home, for she was so noisy and untidy that I did not care to have her on the premises, and I thought granny could sit in Mrs. Marshall's room and hold baby while Peggy waited on me and ran errands.

Hope worked splendidly: when she had scoured the kitchen and front passage, she went upstairs and scrubbed the two rooms where granny and the children slept. I had made a potato pie with some scraps of meat Peggy had brought from the butcher's, and had seen the dish emptied by the hungry children. When

I had fed the sandy cat and had had my own dinner, which Mrs. Barton had packed in a nice clean basket, and had peeped at my patient, I went upstairs to help Hope, and Peggy went with me. The state of the sleeping-rooms had horrified me in the morning; the windows had evidently not been open for weeks, and the sheets on granny's bed were black with dirt. Hope had washed the bedstead, and Peggy had lighted a fire, that the room might be habitable by night. Tim came up while we were busy, and stared at us. I was helping Peggy drag the mattresses and bedclothes into the passage. The open windows and the wet boards reeking with soft soap evidently astonished him.

'Where be us to sleep to-night?' quoth Tim; 'it is colder than in the yard.' But Peggy, who was excited by her work, bade him hold his tongue and not stand gaping there blocking up the passage.

I had been singing over my work, just to put heart into all of us and make us forget what a very disagreeable business it was, when Tim again made his appearance and said there was a gentleman in the kitchen. 'He thought he knowed him, but wasn't sure, but he had asked for the lady.' I went down at once, and found it was Mr. Tudor; he was sitting very comfortably by the fire, with all the children round him; little Janie was on his knee; her face was clean, and her pretty curls had been nicely brushed, so I did not mind her cuddling up to him, and I knew he was fond of children and always ready to play with them.

He put her down and shook hands with me, and said the vicar had sent him to look after me, as he could not come himself. I thought he looked a little amused at my appearance; and no wonder. I had quite forgotten that I had tied a handkerchief over my head to keep the dust from off my hair; with my holland bib-apron and sleeves, and pinned-up dress, I must have looked an odd figure; but when I said so he laughed, and observed that he rather admired my novel costume: it reminded him of a Highland peasant he had once seen.

'Was that you who were singing just now, Miss Garston?' he asked presently, looking at me with some attention.

'Yes,' I returned. 'You seem surprised. Surely you have heard me sing at Hyde Park Gate?' But he shook his head very decidedly.

'I should not have forgotten your voice if I had once heard

it,' he said, in such a pleasant manner that the straightforward compliment did not embarrass me. 'You ought not to let such a talent rust, Miss Garston: the vicar must utilise you for our Penny Readings.'

I was horrified at this notion, and told him very seriously that nothing would induce me to sing on a platform, but that it was not my intention to let it rust, only I had my own ideas how best to utilise it.

He looked curious at this, but I changed the subject by asking him if he would like to see Mrs. Marshall. He hesitated, coloured slightly as though the question were distasteful, then he put down Janie from his knee,—for the child had clambered up again,—and said the vicar had undertaken the case, as he was rather new to the work, but he would see her if I wished it.

I was provoking enough to say that I did wish it, for I wanted him to see the comfortable appearance of the room that he so dreaded to enter. I felt sorry for Mr. Tudor in my heart that his work should be so distasteful to him: he was a fine, manly young fellow, who would have made a splendid sailor or soldier, but sick-rooms and old women were not to his taste, and yet he was very gentle and sympathising in his manners, and all the poor people liked him.

Granny was dozing by the fire, and the baby was asleep on the mother's bed, and as I opened the door I quite enjoyed Mr. Tudor's start of astonishment at the changed scene. I did not let him stay long, but I thought his kind looks and pleasant voice would cheer poor Mary. He said very little to either her or Elspeth, but what he said was sensible and to the point.

I sent him away after this, for my work was waiting for me. He went off laughing, and protesting that he had no idea that I had taken up the *rôle* of a charitable charwoman, and that the vicar would remonstrate with me on the subject.

I think we all felt the brighter for Mr. Tudor's little visit, though he had said nothing specially clever; but he was an honest, genial creature, and I liked him thoroughly. I stopped at the cottage late that evening, for Mrs. Marshall wanted a letter written to her husband, and I could not refuse to do it. I was almost too tired to enjoy Kingsley that night, and found myself dozing over it, so I shut it up and went to bed.

Mr. Hamilton did not make his appearance until later the next day, when I was presiding over the children's dinner. I

had just carried in a plate of lentil soup to granny, whom I now kept entirely in the sick-room, as she was too old to bear the children's noise, and the constant draughts from the opening door would soon have laid her on a sick-bed. I had baby in my lap, and was feeding her when he looked in on us.

I rose at once to follow him into the sick-room, but he waved me back.

'Do not disturb yourself, Miss Garston; you all look very comfortable. Jock, are you trying to swallow that spoon? You will find it a hard morsel.' And then he went into the other room, and, to my surprise, we did not see him again.

I left a little earlier that evening, as I knew Uncle Max meant to pay me a visit; but it was already dark when I closed the little gate behind me. I had not gone many paces when I heard footsteps behind me, and, somewhat to my dismay, Mr. Hamilton joined me.

'Have you only just finished your day's work?' he said, in evident surprise. 'This will never do, Miss Garston; we shall have you knocking yourself up if you use up your time and strength so recklessly, and I want you for another case.'

'I am quite prepared for that,' I answered; but I am afraid my voice was a little weary. 'You called on me yesterday, Mr. Hamilton. I was sorry to be out, but there was so much to do that I stayed at the cottage until quite late in the evening.'

'Just so,' in rather a vexed tone. 'The village nurse will be on a sick-bed herself if this goes on.'

'Oh, what nonsense!' I returned, laughing, for I forgot for the moment in the darkness that I was speaking to the formidable Mr. Hamilton. 'I do not always mean to work quite so hard. Mr. Tudor called me a charitable charwoman last evening; but this is an exceptional case,—so many helpless beings, and such shocking mismanagement and neglect. When I put things on a proper footing I shall not spend so much time there.'

'What do you mean by putting things on a proper footing?' he asked, with some show of interest.

'When the place has been properly cleaned it will be kept tolerably tidy with less labour. Hope Weatherley has been hard at work for two days, and things are now pretty comfortable.'

'I suppose—excuse me if the question seems impertinent, but I imagine that you paid Hope out of your own purse?'

'For those two days, certainly. It was necessary for my own comfort, speaking selfishly, that the place should be made habitable. My nursing would have been a mere mockery unless we could have got rid of the dirt.'

'You are perfectly right. I had no idea you were such a practical person. But, if you will allow me to give you a hint, Marshall earns good wages, and there ought to be sufficient money to pay for a moderate amount of help.'

'I told Mrs. Marshall so this morning,' I returned, pleased to find myself talking with such ease to Mr. Hamilton; but he seemed quite different to-night; evidently his *brusquerie* was a mere mannerism that he laid aside at times; he had lost that sneering manner that I so much disliked. I remembered Uncle Max said that he was kind-hearted and eccentric.

'We had a long talk,' I went on. 'Marshall sends the money regularly, and I am to manage it. Mrs. Tyler is to wash for us, and I think we can afford to have Hope for at least an hour a day, to do the rough work; Peggy is so little to do everything.'

'Heaven help poor Peg!' he ejaculated; 'for she will soon have all those children on her hands. Mrs. Marshall cannot last long. Well, Miss Garston, how many hours do you intend to spend at the cottage daily?'

'I should think two hours in the morning and an hour and a half in the late afternoon or evening might do, unless there be a change for the worse, or Elspeth falls ill; she is very old and feeble.'

'She was half starved, poor old creature,—fairly clemmed, as they say in the North. Here we are at your place, Miss Garston. How bright and inviting your parlour looks! I wonder if I may ask to come in for a few minutes, while I tell you about the other case?'

Of course I could not do less than invite him to enter, after that; but I am afraid my manner lacked enthusiasm, and betrayed the fact that I was unwilling to entertain Mr. Hamilton as a guest, for when I saw his face in the lamplight he was regarding me with some amusement.

'Cunliffe has done me no end of mischief,' he said, as he offered to relieve me of my wraps: 'that unfortunate speech has strongly prejudiced you against me. Confess, now, you think me a very disagreeable person, because I happened to disagree with you that evening.'

'Certainly not on that account,' I returned, falling into the trap; and then we both laughed, for I had as good as owned that I thought him disagreeable. That laugh made us better friends. I felt I no longer disliked him: it was certainly not his fault that Providence had given him that type of face, and I supposed one could get used to it.

'I was in an evil mood that afternoon,' he went on, and then I knew instinctively that he wanted to efface his satirical words from my memory. 'Things had gone wrong somehow,—for this world of ours is a mighty muddle sometimes.' And here he gave an impatient sigh. 'It is a relief to human nature to vent one's spleen on the first handy person that crosses one's path, and, pardon me for saying so, you were just a little aggressive yourself,' looking at me rather dubiously, as though he were not quite sure how I should take this hit. My conscience told me that I had been far from peaceable; on the contrary, I had been decidedly cross; not that I would confess that this was the case, so I only returned mildly that I considered that he had been hard on me that day, and had handled my pet theory very roughly.

'Come, now you are talking like a reasonable woman, and I will plead guilty to some severity. Let me own that I distrusted you, Miss Garston. I have a horror of gush, and what I call the working mania of young ladies, and you had not proved to me then that you could work. At the present day, if a girl is restless and bad-tempered, and cannot get on with her own people, she takes up hospital-nursing, and a rare muddle she makes of it sometimes. I own hospital work is better than the convent of the Middle Ages, where the troublesome young ladies were safely immured; but, as I said before, I distrust the hysterical restlessness of the age.'

'No doubt you have a fair amount of argument on your side,' I replied, so meekly that he looked at me, and then got up from his chair and said hastily that I was tired, and he was thoughtless to keep me waiting for my tea.

'Let me give you some, while you tell me about the case,' was my hospitable reply; for, though I felt no special desire to prolong our *tête-à-tête*, mere civility prompted my offer.

He hesitated, then, to my surprise, sat down again, and said he would be very much obliged if I would give him a cup of tea, as he was tired too, and had to go farther and keep his dinner waiting.

I went out of the room to remove my hat and speak to Mrs. Barton. When I came back he was standing before Charlie's photograph, and evidently studying it with some attention, but he made no remark about it; and I told him of my own accord that it was the portrait of my twin-brother, who had died two years ago.

'Indeed! There is no likeness; at least I should not have known it was your brother. This is often the case between relations,' he continued hastily, as though he feared he had hurt me. 'What a snug little berth you have, Miss Garston, and everything so ship-shape too! I suppose that is your piano; but I am afraid you will have little time to practise.' And then, as I handed him his tea, he threw himself down in the easy-chair and seemed prepared to enjoy himself.

Looking at Mr. Hamilton this evening, I could have believed he had two sides to his character: he presented such a complete contrast to the Mr. Hamilton in Uncle Max's study that I was quite puzzled by it. He had certainly a clever face, and his smile was quick and bright; it was only in rest that his mouth looked so stern and hard. I found myself wondering once or twice if he had known any great trouble that had embittered him.

'Well, I must tell you about poor Phœbe Locke,' he began suddenly. 'I want you to find out what you can do for her. The Lockes are respectable people: Phœbe and her sister were dressmakers. They live a little lower down,—at Woodbine Cottage.

'Some years ago spinal disease came on, and now Phœbe is bedridden. She suffers a good deal at times, but her worst trouble is that her nerves are disordered, most likely from the dulness and monotony of her life. She suffers cruelly from low spirits; and no wonder, lying all day in that dull little back room. Her sister cannot sit with her, as Phœbe cannot bear the noise of the sewing-machine, and the sight of the outer world seems to irritate her. The neighbours would come in to cheer her up, but she does not seem able to bear their loud voices. It is wonderful,' he continued musingly, 'how education and refinement train the voice: strange to say, though my voice is not particularly low, and certainly not sweet, it never seems to jar upon her.'

'Very likely not,' I returned quickly; 'no doubt she depends upon you for all her comforts: to most invalids the doctor's visit is the one bright spot in the day.'

'It seems strange that we do not project our own shadows sometimes, and make our patient shiver,' he said, with a touch of gruffness. It is little that I can do for Phœbe, except order her a blister or ice when she needs it. One cannot touch the real nervous suffering: there is where I look to you for help; a little cheerful talk now and then may lighten her burden. Anyhow, it would be a help for poor Miss Locke, who has a sad time of it trying to earn food for them both. There is a little niece who lives with them, a subdued, uncanny little creature, who looks as though the childhood were crushed out of her; you might take her in hand too.'

'I wonder if Phœbe would like me to sing to her,' I observed quietly. 'I have found it answer sometimes in nervous illnesses.'

I thought my remark surprised him.

'It is a good idea,' he said slowly. 'You might try it. Of course it would depend a great deal on the quality of voice and style of singing. I wonder if you would allow me to judge of this,'—looking meaningly at the piano; but I shook my head at this, and he did not press the point.

We had very little talk after this, for he went away almost directly, first arranging to meet me at Mrs. Marshall's about four the next day and go with me to Woodbine Cottage.

'You will find plenty of work, Miss Garston,' were his final words, 'so do not waste your strength unnecessarily.' And then he left the room, but came back a moment afterwards to say that his sisters meant to call on me, only they thought I was hardly settled yet: 'we must get Mr. Cunliffe to bring you up to Gladwyn: we must not let you mope.'

I thought there was little chance of this, with Uncle Max and Mr. Tudor always looking after me. Mr. Hamilton had hardly closed the door before Uncle Max opened it again.

'So the enemy has tasted bread and salt, Ursula,' he said, looking excessively pleased: 'that is right, my dear: do not give way to absurd prejudices. You and Hamilton will get on splendidly by and by, when you get used to his brusque manner.' And, though I did not quite endorse this opinion, I was obliged to acknowledge to myself that the last half-hour had not been so unpleasant after all.

CHAPTER X

A DIFFICULT PATIENT

I HAD a little talk with granny the next day.

Mrs. Marshall was dozing uneasily, and I was sitting by granny, nursing the baby, and waiting for Mr. Hamilton, when I felt her cold wrinkled hand laid on mine.

'What is it, Elspeth?' I asked, thinking she wanted something.

'What put it in your head, my bairn, to do the Lord's work? that is what I am wanting to know. I have been listening to you this morning singing like a bird about the house, with all the bit creatures chirping about you, and I said to myself, "What could have put it into her head to leave all her fine friends, and come and wait on the likes of us old and sick folk and young bairns?"'

I do not know what there was in this speech that made me cry, but I know I had some difficulty in answering, but I told her a little about Charlie, and how sad I was, and how I loved the work, and she patted my hand softly all the time.

'Never fret, my bairn. You will not be lonely long: the Lord will see to that. He would not let you work for Him and do nothing for you in return. Nay, that is not His way. Look at me: as doctor said the other day, I have dreed my weird; few and evil have been my days, like Jacob, but here I sit like a lady by the fire, warm and comfortable and hearty, thank God; and Andrew's wife lies on her death-bed, poor woman.'

'Yes; but, Elspeth, you sit there in the dark.'

'Eh, but it is peaceful and quiet-like, and the Lord bides with me, "and darkness and light are both alike to him,"'

finished Elspeth reverently. And then I heard the click of the gate, and rose hastily, only the baby cried as I laid her on Elspeth's lap, and I had to stay a moment to pacify her.

Mr. Hamilton came in and stood by us.

'Do not hurry yourself; I can easily wait a few minutes if you are not ready. Are you sure you are not too tired to come?' he continued, looking at me a little inquisitively, and I was certain that he noticed the trace of tears on my face. Why was it I never could speak of my darling quite calmly?

'I am perfectly ready, and baby has left off crying,' I returned, taking up my basket, and then we left the house together.

'I hope you do not suffer from low spirits, like the rest of us,' he said, in rather a kind tone, as we walked on. 'It is to be expected that a cross-grained fellow like myself should have fits of the blues occasionally. That is one thing I particularly admire about Cunliffe! however worried he is, one never sees him out of humour; his ups and downs are never perceptible. I do believe he is less selfish than other people.'

'There is no one like Uncle Max,' I rejoined fervently.

'Is it not odd that we should suit each other so well?' he asked presently, 'for we are complete contrasts. I can bear him to say things to me that I would knock any other fellow down for saying. That is why I let him preach to me, because he honestly believes what he says and tries to act up to his profession.' He broke off here, for by this time we had reached Woodbine Cottage, and he unlatched the gate for me.

A thin-faced child with a cropped head and clean white pinafore opened the door, and dropped an alarmed courtesy when she saw us.

'Please sir, Aunt Susan is out, and Aunt Phœbe is very bad this afternoon, and cannot see any one. She is lying in the dark, and I was to let none of the neighbours in while Aunt Susan was away.'

'All right, Kitty; but Aunt Phœbe will see me.' And he walked into the passage, and told the child to close the door gently. The room we passed was strewn with work-material, and looked cold and comfortless, but a small kitchen opposite had a warm cosy aspect. Mr. Hamilton passed both rooms and tapped at a door lower down the passage, and then without waiting for an answer entered, and beckoned me to follow him.

A dark curtain had been drawn across the window, and the dim glow of a cindery fire scarcely gave sufficient light to discern the different pieces of furniture. Mr. Hamilton gave vent to a suppressed exclamation of impatience as he seized the poker, but I could not but notice the skilful and almost noiseless manner in which he manipulated the coals. Then he looked round for a match, and lighted a candle on the mantelpiece, in spite of a peevish remonstrance from the patient.

'You will make my head worse, doctor: nothing but the dark eases it.'

'Nonsense, Phœbe! I know better than that,' he returned cheerfully, and then he stepped up to the bed, and I followed him. The woman who lay there was still young in years, she could not have been more than three- or four-and-thirty, but every semblance of youth was crushed out of her by some subtile and mysterious suffering; it might have been the face of a dead woman, only for the living eyes that looked at us.

The hopeless wistful look in those eyes gave me a singular shock. I had never seen human eyes with the same expression; they seemed as though they were appealing against some awful destiny. Once when Charlie and I were staying at Rutherford a beautiful spaniel belonging to Lesbia had been accidentally shot while straying in some wood. The poor animal had dragged himself with pain and difficulty to the garden-gate, and there we found him. I shall never forget the wistfulness of the poor creature's eyes when his mistress knelt down and caressed him. He died a few minutes afterwards, licking her hand. I could not help thinking of Tito when I first saw Phœbe Locke; for the same unreasoning anguish seemed in the sick woman's eyes. A tormented soul looked out of them.

There was something rigid and uncompromising in the whole aspect of the sick-room; there was nothing to tone down and soften the harsh details of bodily suffering; everything was in spotless order; the sheets were white as the driven snow; a formidable phalanx of medicine-bottles stood on the small square table; there were no books, no pictures, no flowers: a sampler hung over the mantelpiece, that was all. I saw Mr. Hamilton glance disapprovingly at the row of bottles.

'I told Kitty to clear all that rubbish away,' he said curtly. 'Why do you not have something pleasanter to look at, Phœbe? —some flowers, or a canary? you would find plenty of amusement in watching a canary.'

'Birds are never still for a moment; they would drive me mad,' returned Phœbe, in the hollow tones that seemed natural to her. 'Flowers are better; but what have I to do with flowers? Doctor,' her voice rising into a shrill crescendo, 'you must give me something to send me to sleep, or I shall go mad. I think, think, think, until my head is in a craze with pain and misery.'

'Well, well, we will see about it,' humouring her as though she were a child. 'Will you not speak to this lady, Phœbe? She has come down here to help us all,—sick people, and unhappy people, and every one that wants help.'

'She can't do anything for me,' muttered Phœbe restlessly; 'no one—not even you, doctor, can do anything for me. I am doomed,—doomed before my time.'

Mr. Hamilton looked at me meaningly, as though to say, 'Now you see what you have to do: this is more your work than mine.' I obeyed the hint, and accosted the sick woman as cheerfully as though her dismal speech had not curdled my blood.

'I hope I shall be some comfort to you; it is hard indeed if no one can help you, when you have so much to bear!'

'To bear!' repeating my words as though they stung her. 'I have lain here for three years—three years come Christmas Eve, doctor—between these four walls, summer and winter, winter and summer, and never knew except by heat or cold what season of the year it was. And I am young,—just turned four-and-thirty,—and I may lie here thirty years more, unless I die or go mad.'

'Now, Phœbe,' remonstrated Mr. Hamilton,—and how gently he spoke!—'have I not told you over and over that things may mend yet if you will only be patient and good? You are just making things worse by bearing them so badly. Why, a friend of mine has been seven years on her back like you, and she is the happiest, cheeriest body: it is quite a pleasure to go into her room.'

Maybe she is good, and I am wicked,' returned Phœbe sullenly. 'I cannot help it, doctor: it is one of my bad days, and nothing but wicked words come uppermost. The devil has a deal of power when a woman is chained as I am.'

'Don't you think you could exorcise the demon by a song, Miss Garston?' observed Mr. Hamilton, in an undertone. 'This is just the case where music may be a soothing influence; something must be tried for the poor creature.'

The proposition almost took away my breath. Sing now! before Mr. Hamilton! And yet how in sheer humanity could I refuse? I had often sung before to my patients, and had never minded it in the least; but before Mr. Hamilton!

'You need not think of me,' he continued provokingly,—for of course I was thinking of him: 'I am no critic in the musical line. Just try how it answers, will you?' And he walked away and turned his back to us, and seemed absorbed in the sampler.

For one minute I hesitated, and then I cleared my throat. 'I am going to sing something, Phœbe. Mr. Hamilton thinks it will do you good.' And then, fearful lest her waywardness should stop me, I commenced at once with the first line of the beautiful hymn, 'Art thou weary? art thou languid?'

My voice trembled sadly at first, and my burning face and cold hands testified to my nervousness; but after the first verse I forgot Mr. Hamilton's presence and only remembered it was Charlie's favourite hymn I was singing, and sang it with a full heart.

When I had finished, I bent over Phœbe and asked if I should sing any more, and, to my great delight, she nodded assent. I sang 'Abide with me,' and several other suitable hymns, and I did not stop until the hard look of woe in Phœbe's eyes had softened into a more gentle expression.

As I paused, I looked across the room. Mr. Hamilton was still standing by the mantelpiece, perfectly motionless. He had covered his eyes with his hand, and seemed lost in profound thought. He absolutely started when I addressed him.

'Yes, we will go if you have finished,' but he did not look at me as he spoke. 'Phœbe, has the young lady done you any good? Did you close your eyes and think you heard an angel singing? Now you must let me take her away, for she is very tired, and has worked hard to-day. To-morrow, if you ask her, she will come again.'

'I shall not wait to be asked,' I returned, answering the dumb, wistful look that greeted the doctor's words. 'Oh yes, I shall come again to-morrow, and we will have a little talk, and I will bring you some flowers, and if you care to hear me sing I have plenty of pretty songs.' And then I kissed her forehead, for I felt strongly drawn to the poor creature, as though she were a strange, suffering sister, and I thought that the kiss and the song and the flowers would be a threefold cord

of sympathy for her to bind round her harassed soul through the long hours of the night.

Mr. Hamilton followed me silently out, and on the threshold we encountered Susan Locke. She was a thin, subdued-looking woman, dressed in rusty black, with a careworn, depressed expression that changed into pleasure at the sight of Mr. Hamilton.

'Oh, doctor, this is good of you, surely,—and you so busy! It is one of Phœbe's bad days, when nothing pleases her and she will have naught to say to us, but groan and groan until one's heart is pretty nigh broken. I was half hoping that you would look in on us and give her a bit of a word.'

'Miss Garston has done more than that,' replied Mr. Hamilton. 'I think you will find your sister a little cheered. Give her something comfortable to eat and drink, and speak as cheerfully as you can. Good-night, Miss Locke.' And then he motioned to me to precede him down the little garden. Mr. Hamilton was so very silent all the way home that I was somewhat puzzled; he did not speak at all about Phœbe,—only said that he was afraid that I was very tired, and that he was the same; and when we came in sight of the cottage he left me rather abruptly; if it had not been for his few approving words to Susan Locke, I should have thought something had displeased him.

Uncle Max made me feel a little uncomfortable the next morning. I met him as I was starting for my daily work, and he walked with me to Mrs. Marshall's.

'I was up at Gladwyn last evening, Ursula,' he began. 'Miss Elizabeth is still away, but the other ladies asked very kindly after you. Miss Hamilton means to call on you one afternoon, only she seems puzzled to know how she is ever to find you at home. I cannot think what put Hamilton into such a bad temper; he scarcely spoke to any of us, and looked horribly cranky, only I laughed at him and he got better; he never mentioned your name. You have not fallen out again, eh, little she-bear?' looking at me rather anxiously.

'Oh dear, no; we are perfectly civil to each other; I understand him better now.' But all the same I could not help wondering, as I parted from Max, what could have made Mr. Hamilton so strangely silent.

It was still early in the afternoon when I found myself free to go and see Phœbe; she had been on my mind all day, and had kept me awake for a long time; those miserable eyes

haunted me. I longed so to comfort her. Miss Locke opened the door; I thought she seemed pleased to see me, but she eyed my basket of flowers dubiously.

'Phœbe is looking for you, Miss Garston, though she says nothing about it; it is not her way; but I see her eyes turning to the door every now and then, and she made Kitty open the curtains. If I may make so bold, those flowers are not for Phœbe, surely?'

'Yes, indeed they are, Miss Locke. Dr. Hamilton wishes her to have something pleasant to look at.' But Miss Locke only shook her head.

'The neighbours have sent in flowers often and often, and she has made me carry them out of the room; the vicar used to send them too, but he knows now that it is no manner of use: she always says they do not put flowers in tombs, only outside them: she will have it she is living in a tomb.'

'We must get this idea out of her head,' I returned cheerfully, for I was obstinately bent on having my own way about the flowers.

Kitty was sewing on a little stool by the window; the curtains were undrawn, so that the room was tolerably light, and might have been cheerful, only an ugly wire blind shut out all view of the little garden.

I could not help marvelling at the strange perversity that could wilfully exclude every possible alleviation; there must be some sad warp or twist of the mental nature that could be so prolific of unwholesome fancies. As I turned to the bed I thought Phœbe looked even more ghastly in the daylight than she had done last evening; her skin was yellow and shrivelled, like the skin of an old woman; her eyes looked deep-set and gloomy, but their expression struck me as more human; her thin lips even wore the semblance of a smile.

When I had greeted her, and had drawn from her rather reluctantly that she had had some hours' sleep the previous night, I spoke to Kitty. The little creature looked so subdued and moped in the miserable atmosphere that I was full of pity for her, so I showed her a new skipping-rope that I had bought on my way, and bade her ask her aunt Susan's permission to go out and play.

The child's dull eyes brightened in a moment. 'May I go out, Aunt Phœbe?' she asked breathlessly.

'Yes, go if you like,' was the somewhat ungracious answer.

'She is glad enough to get away from me,' she muttered, when Kitty had shut the door gently behind her. 'Children have no heart; she is an ungrateful, selfish little thing; but they are all that; we clothe her and feed her, and it is little we get out of her in return; and Susan is working her fingers to the bone for the two of us.'

I took no notice of this outburst, and commenced clearing away the medicine-bottles to make room for my basket of chrysanthemums and ivy-leaves. Uncle Max had procured them for me, but I had no idea as I arranged them that they had come from Gladwyn.

Phœbe watched my movements very gloomily; she evidently disapproved of the whole proceeding. I carried out the bottles to Miss Locke, and begged her to throw them away: 'they are of no use to her,' I observed. 'Mr. Hamilton intends to send her a new mixture, and this array of half-emptied phials is simply absurd: it is just a whim. If your sister asks for them when I have gone, you can tell her that Miss Garston ordered them to be destroyed.'

On my return to the room I found Phœbe lying with her eyes closed. I could have laughed outright at her perversity, for of course she had shut them to exclude the sight of the flower-basket, though it was the loveliest little bit of colour, the dark-red chrysanthemum nestled so prettily among trails of tiny variegated ivy. I resolved to punish her for this piece of morbid obstinacy, and took down the wire blind; she was speechless with anger when she found out what I had done, but I was resolved not to humour these ridiculous fancies; the dull wintry light was not too much for her.

'You must not be allowed to have your own way so entirely,' I said, laughing: 'your sister is very wrong to give in to you. Mr. Hamilton wishes your room to be more cheerful: he says the dull surroundings depress and keep you low and despondding, and I must carry out his orders, and try how we are to make your room a little brighter. Now'—as she seemed about to speak—'I am going to sing to you, and then we will have a talk.'

'I don't care to hear singing to-day, my head buzzes so with all this flack,' was the sullen answer; but I took no notice of this ill-tempered remark, and began a little Scotch ballad that I thought was bright and spirited.

She closed her eyes again, with an expression of weariness

and disgust that made me smile in spite of my efforts to keep serious; but I soon found out that she was listening, and so I sang one song after another, without pausing for any comment, and pretended not to notice when the haggard weary eyes unclosed, and fixed themselves first on the flowers, next on my face, and last and longest at the strip of lawn, with the bare gooseberry bushes and the narrow path edged with privet.

When I had sung several ballads, I waited for a minute, and then commenced Bishop Ken's evening hymn, but my voice shook a little as I saw a sudden heaving under the bedclothes, and in another moment the large slow tears coursed down Phœbe's thin face. It was hard to finish the hymn, but I would not have dispensed with the Gloria.

'What is it, Phœbe?' I asked gently, when I had finished. 'I am sorry that I have made you cry.'

'You need not be sorry,' she sobbed at last, with difficulty: 'it eases my head, and I thought nothing would ever draw a tear from me again. I was too miserable to cry, and they say —I have read it somewhere, in the days when I used to read— that there is no such thing as a tear in hell.'

I tried not to look astonished at this strange speech. I must let this poor creature talk, or how should I ever find out the root of her disease? so I answered quietly that no doubt she was right, that in that place of outer darkness there should be weeping, without tears, and a gnashing of teeth, beside which our bitterest human sorrow would seem like nothing.

'That is true,' she returned, with a groan; 'but, Miss Garston, hell has begun for me here; for three years I have been in torment, and rightly too,—and rightly too,—for I never was a good woman, never like Susan, who read her Bible and went to church. Oh, she is a good creature, is Susan.'

'I am glad to hear it, Phœbe: so, you see, your affliction, heavy as it is,—and I am not saying it is not heavy,—is not without alleviation. The Merciful Father, who has laid this cross upon you, has given you this kind companion as a consoler. What a comfort you must be to each other! what a divine work has been given to you both to do,—to bring up that motherless little creature, who must owe her very life and happiness to you!'

She lay and looked at me with an expression of bewildered astonishment, and at this moment Miss Locke opened the door, carrying a little tea-tray for her sister. I had a glimpse of

Kitty curled up on the mat outside the door, with the skipping-rope still in her hand. She had evidently been listening to the singing, for she crept away, but in the distance I could hear her humming 'Ye banks and braes' in a sweet childish treble that was very harmonious and true.

[redacted]

'Ay, that was father's notion; and I was never clever enough to argue with him. But you are not wicked, my woman, only a bit tiresome and perverse and wanting in faith.' And Miss Locke, who was used to these wild moods, patted her sister's shoulder, and bade her drink her tea before it got cold, in a sensible matter-of-fact way, that was not without its influence on the wayward creature; for she did not refuse the comforting draught.

I took my leave soon after this, after promising to repeat my visit on the next evening. Phœbe bade me good-bye rather coldly, but I took no notice of her contrary mood. Miss Locke followed me out of the room, and asked me anxiously what I thought of her sister.

'It is difficult to judge,' I returned, hesitating a little. 'You must remember this is only my second visit, and I have not made much way with her. She is in a state of bodily and mental discomfort very painful to witness. If I am not mistaken, she is driving herself half-crazy with introspection and self-will. You must not give way to this morbid desire to increase her own wretchedness. She needs firmness as well as kindness.'

Miss Locke looked at me wistfully a moment.

'What am I to do? She would fret herself into a fever if I crossed her whims. Directly you have left the house she will be asking for that wire blind again, though it would do her poor eyes good to see the thrushes feeding on the lawn, and there is the little robin that comes to us every winter and taps at the window for crumbs; but she would shut them all out,—birds, and sunshine, and flowers.'

'Just as she would shut out her Father's love, if she could; but it is all round her, and no inward or outward darkness can hinder that. Miss Locke, you must be very firm. You must not move the flowers or replace the blind on any pretext whatever. She must be comforted in spite of herself. She reminds me of some passionate child who breaks all its toys because some wish has been denied. We are sorry for the child's disappointment, but a wise parent would inflict punishment for the fit of passion.'

Miss Locke sighed; her mouth twitched with repressed emotion. She was evidently an affectionate, reticent woman, who found it difficult to express her feelings.

'I am keeping you standing all this time,' she said apolo-

getically, 'and I might have asked you to sit down a minute in our little kitchen. Let me pour you out a cup of tea, Miss Garston. Kitty and I were just going to begin.'

I accepted this offer, as I thought Miss Locke evidently wanted to speak to me. She seemed pleased at my acquiescence, and told Kitty to stay with her aunt Phœbe a few minutes.

'I have baked a nice hot cake with currants in it, Kitty,' she said persuasively, 'and you shall have your share, hot and buttered, if you will be patient and wait a little.'

'She is a good little thing,' I observed, as the child reluctantly withdrew to her dreary post, after a longing look at the table, while Miss Locke placed a rocking-chair with a faded green cushion by the fire, and opened the oven door to inspect the cake. 'It is dull work for the little creature to be so much in the sick-room. It is hardly a wholesome atmosphere for a child.'

Miss Locke shook her head as though she endorsed this opinion.

'What am I to do?' she returned sorrowfully. 'Kitty is young, but she has to bear our burdens. I spare her all I can; but when I am at my dressmaking Phœbe cannot be left alone, and she has learned to be quiet and handy, and can do all sorts of things for Phœbe. I know it is not good for her living alone with us, but the Lord has ordered the child's life as well as ours,' she finished reverently.

'We must see what can be done for Kitty,' was my answer. 'She can be free to play while I am with your sister. I sent her out with her new skipping-rope this evening. What brought her back so soon?'

'It was the singing,' returned Miss Locke, smiling. 'The street door was just ajar, and Kitty crept in and curled herself up on the mat. It sounded so beautiful, you see; for Kitty and I only hear singing at church, and it is not often I can get there, with Phœbe wanting me; so it did us both good, you may be sure of that.'

I could not but be pleased at this simple tribute of praise, but something else struck me more, the unobtrusive goodness and self-denial of Susan Locke. What a life hers must be! I hinted at this as gently as I could.

'Ay, Phœbe has always been a care to me,' she sighed. 'She was never as strong and hearty as other girls, and she

wanted her own way, and fretted when she could not get it. Father spoiled her, and mother gave in to her more than she did to me; and when trouble came all along of Robert Owen, and he used her cruel, just flinging her aside when he saw some one he fancied more than Phœbe, and driving her mad with spite and jealousy, then she let herself go, as it were. She was never religious, not to speak of, all the time she kept company with Robert, so when her hopes of him came to an end she had nothing to support her. It needs plenty of faith to make us bear our troubles patiently.'

'And then her health failed.'

'Yes; and mother died, and father followed her within six months, and Phœbe could not be with them, and she took on about that; she has had a deal of trouble, and that is why I cannot find it in my heart to be hard on her; she was that fond of Robert, though he was a worthless sort of fellow, that, as the saying is, she worshipped the ground he walked on. Ah, Phœbe was bonnie-looking then, though she was never over-strong, and had not much colour; but he need not have called her a sickly ill-tempered wench when he threw her over and married Nancy. It was a cruel way to serve a woman that loved him as Phœbe did.'

'She has certainly had her share of trouble. How long ago did this happen to your sister?'

'It must be five years since Robert and Nancy were married. Phœbe was never the same woman since then, though her health did not fail for a year or more afterwards; Mr. Hamilton always says she has had a good riddance of Robert. He never thought much of him, and he has told me that it is far better that Phœbe never had a chance of marrying him, for she would have been a sad burden to any man; and she would not have had you to nurse her.' And Miss Locke's careworn face brightened. 'That is just what I tell myself, when I am out of heart about her; the Lord knew Robert would have been a cruel husband to her,—for he is not too kind to Nancy,—and so He kept Phœbe away from him. Phœbe is not one to bear unkindness,—it just maddens her,—and we have all spoilt her.'

'Just so, and she knows her power over you. I am afraid she gives you a great deal to bear, Miss Locke.'

'I never mind it from her,' she answered simply. 'She is all I have in the world except Kitty, and I am thinking

what I can do for her from morning to night; that is the best and the worst of my work, one need never stop thinking for it. Sometimes, when I am tired, or things have gone wrong with my customers, or I am a bit behindhand with the rent, I wish I could talk it over with her; it would ease me somehow; but I never do give way to the feeling, for it would only fret and worry her.'

'You are wrong,' I returned warmly. 'Mr. Hamilton would tell you so if you asked him. Any worry, any outside trouble, would be better for Phœbe than this unhealthy feeding on herself. Take my advice, Miss Locke, talk about yourself and your own troubles. Phœbe is fond of you, it will rouse her to enter more into your life.'

Miss Locke shook her head, and the tears came into her mild hazel eyes.

'There is One who knows it all. I'll not be troubling my poor Phœbe,' she said, and her hands trembled a little. Kitty came in at this moment and said her aunt Phœbe wanted her, so we were obliged to break off the conversation.

I thought about it all rather sadly as I sat by my solitary fire that evening with Tinker's head on my lap. He had taken to me, and I always found him waiting for my return; but it was less of Phœbe than of Susan I was thinking. I was so absorbed in my reflections that Uncle Max's voice outside quite startled me.

'May I come in, Ursula?' he said, thrusting in his head. 'I have been at the choir-practice, so I thought I would call as I passed.'

Of course I gave him a warm welcome, and he drew his chair to the opposite side of the fire, and declared he felt very comfortable: then he asked me why I was looking grave, and if I were tired of my solitude. I disclaimed this indignantly, and gave him a sketch of my day's work, ending with my talk to Susan Locke.

He seemed interested, and listened attentively.

'It is such a sad case, Max,—poor Phœbe's, I mean,—but I am almost as sorry for her sister. Susan Locke is such a good woman.'

'You would say so if you knew all, Ursula, but Miss Locke would never tell you herself. When Phœbe's illness came on, and Hamilton told them that she might not get well for a year or two, or perhaps longer, Susan broke off her own engagement

to stay with her sister. Her father was just dead, and the child Kitty had to live with them.'

'Miss Locke engaged!' I exclaimed, in some surprise, for it had never struck me that the homely middle-aged woman had this sort of experience in her life.

Max looked amused.

'In that class they do not always choose youth and beauty. Certainly Susan Locke was neither young nor handsome, but she was a neat-looking body, only she has aged of late. Do you want to know all about it? Well, she was engaged to a man named Duncan: he was a widower with three or four children; he had the all-sorts shop down the village, only he moved last year. He was a respectable man and had a comfortable little business, and I daresay he thought Miss Locke would make a good mother to his children. She told me all about it, poor thing! She would have liked to marry Duncan; she was fond of him, and thought he would have made her a steady husband; but with Phœbe on her hands she could not do her duty to him or the children.

'"And there is Kitty; and he has enough of his own; and a sickly body like Phœbe would hinder the comfort of the house, and I have promised mother to take care of her." And then she asked my opinion. Well, I could not but own that with the shop and the house to mind, and five children, counting Kitty, and a bedridden invalid, her hands would be overweighted with work and worry.

'"I think so too," she answered, as quietly as possible, "and I have no right to burden Duncan. I am sure he will listen to reason when I tell him Phœbe is against our marrying." And she never said another word about it. But Duncan came to me about six months afterwards and asked me to put up his banns.

'"I wanted Susan Locke," he said, in a shamefaced manner, "but that sister of hers hinders our marrying; so, as I must think of the children, I have got Janet Sharpe to promise me. She is a good, steady lass, and Susan speaks well of her."'

Uncle Max had told his story without interruption. I listened to it with almost painful interest.

With what quiet self-denial this homely woman had put aside her own hopes of happiness for the sake of the sickly creature dependent on her! She had owned her affection for Duncan with the utmost simplicity; but in her unselfishness

she refused to burden him with her responsibilities. If she married him she must do her duty by him and his children, and she felt that Phœbe would be a drag on her strength and time.

'She is a good woman, Uncle Max,' I observed, when he had finished. 'She is working herself to death, and Phœbe never gives her a word of comfort.'

'How can you expect it?' he replied quietly. 'You cannot draw comfort out of empty wells, and poor Phœbe's heart is like a broken cistern, holding nothing.'

'But surely you talk to her, Uncle Max?'

'I have tried to do so,' he answered sadly; 'but for the last year she has refused to see me, and Hamilton has advised me to keep away. If I cross the threshold it is to see Miss Locke. I thought it was a whim at first, and I sent Tudor in my stead; but she was so rude to him, and lashed herself into such a fury against us clerics, that he came back looking quite scared, and asked why I had sent him to a mad woman.'

'She was angry with me to-day.' And I told him about the blind.

'That is right, Ursula,' he said encouragingly. 'You have made a good beginning: the singing may do more to soften her strange nature than all our preaching. You will be a comfort to Miss Locke, at any rate.' And then he stopped, and looked at me rather wistfully, as though he longed to tell me something but could not make up his mind to do it 'You will be a comfort to us all if you go on in this way,' he continued; and then he surprised me by asking if I had not yet seen the ladies from Gladwyn.

The question struck me as rather irrelevant, but I took care not to say so as I answered in the negative.

'You have been here nearly a week; they might have risked a call by this time,' he returned, knitting his brows as though something perplexed him; but I broke in on his reflections rather impatiently.

'I declare, Max, you have quite piqued my curiosity about these people; some mystery seems to attach to Gladwyn. I shall expect to see something very wonderful.'

'Then you will be disappointed,' he returned quietly, not a bit offended by my petulance. 'I cannot help wishing you to make acquaintance with them, as they are such intimate friends of mine, and I think it will be a mutual benefit.'

Then, as I made no reply to this, he went on, still more mildly:

'I confess I should like your opinion of them. I have a great reliance in your intuition and common sense; and you are so deliciously frank and outspoken, Ursula, that I shall soon know what you think. Well, I must not stay gossiping here. Your company is very charming, my dear, but I have letters to write before bedtime. You will see our friends in church on Sunday. I hear Miss Elizabeth comes home to-morrow; she is the lively one,—not quite of the Merry Peck-sniff order, but still a bright, chatty lady.

> "From morning till night
> It is Betty's delight
> To chatter and talk without stopping."

You know the rest, Ursula, my dear. By the bye,' opening the door, and looking cautiously into the passage, 'I wonder whom the Bartons are entertaining in the kitchen to-night? I hear a masculine voice.'

'It is only Mr. Hamilton,' I returned indifferently. 'I heard him come in half an hour ago; he is giving Nathaniel a lesson in mathematics.'

'To be sure. What a good fellow he is!' in an enthusiastic tone. 'Well, good-night, child: do not sit up late.' And he vanished.

I am afraid I disregarded this injunction, for I wanted to write to my poor Jill—who was never absent from my mind—and Lesbia; and I was loath to leave the fireside, and too much excited for sleep.

When I had finished my letters I still sat on gazing into the bright caverns of coal, and thinking over Susan Locke's history.

'How many good people there are in the world!' I said, half aloud; but I almost jumped out of my chair at the sound of a deep, angry voice on the other side of the door.

'It is a thriftless, wasteful sort of thing burning the candle at both ends. Women have very little common sense, after all.'

I extinguished the lamp hastily, for of course Mr. Hamilton's growl was meant for me, though it was addressed to Nathaniel. I heard him close the door a moment afterwards, and Nathaniel crept back into the kitchen. I woke rather tired the next day, and owned he was right, for I found my duties somewhat irksome.

that morning. The feeling did not pass off, and I actually discovered that I was dreading my visit to Phœbe, only of course I scouted it as nonsense.

Miss Locke was out, and Kitty opened the door. Her demure little face brightened when she saw me, and especially when I placed a large brown-paper parcel in her arms, of that oblong shape dear to all doll-loving children, and bade her take it into the kitchen.

'It is too dark and cold for you to play outside, Kitty,' I observed, 'so perhaps you will make the acquaintance of the blue-eyed baby I have brought you; when Aunt Susan comes in, you can ask her for some pieces to dress her in, for her paper robe is rather cold.'

Kitty's eyes grew wide with surprise and delight as she ran off with her treasure; the baby-doll would be a playmate for the lonely child, and solace those weary hours in the sick-room. I would rather have brought her a kitten, but I felt instinctively that no animal would be tolerated by the invalid.

It was somewhat dark when I entered the room, but one glance showed me that my directions had been obeyed; the window was unshaded, and the flowers were in their place.

Phœbe was lying watching the fire. I saw at once that she was in a better mood. The few questions I put to her were answered quietly and to the point, and there was no excitement or exaggeration in her manner.

I did not talk much. After a minute or two I sat down by the uncurtained window and began to sing as usual. I commenced with a simple ballad, but very soon my songs merged into hymns. It began to be a pleasure to me to sing in that room. I had a strange feeling as though my voice were keeping the evil spirits away. I thought of the shepherd-boy who played before Saul and refreshed the king's tormented mind; and now and then an unuttered prayer would rise to my lips that in this way I might be able to comfort the sad soul that truly Satan had bound.

When my voice grew a little weary, I rose softly and took down the old brown sampler, as I wished to replace it by a little picture I had brought with me.

It was a sacred photograph of the Crucifixion, in a simple Oxford frame, and had always been a great favourite with me; it was less painful in its details than other delineations of this subject: the face of the divine sufferer wore an expression of

tender pity. Beneath the cross the Blessed Virgin and St. John stood with clasped hands,—adopted love and most sacred responsibility,—receiving sanction and benediction.

I had scarcely hung it on the nail before Phœbe's querulous voice remonstrated with me.

'Why can you not leave well alone, Miss Garston? I was thanking you in my heart for the music, but you have just driven it away. I cannot have that picture before my eyes; it is too painful.'

'You will not find it so,' I replied quietly; 'it is a little present I have brought you. My dead brother bought it for me when he was a boy at school, and it is one of the things I most prize. He is dead, you know, and that makes it doubly dear to me. That is why I want you to have it, because I have so much and you so little.'

My speech moved her a little, for her great eyes softened as she looked at me.

'So you have been in trouble, too,' she said softly. 'And yet you can sing like a bird that has lost its way and finds itself nearly at the gate of Paradise.'

'Shall I tell you about my trouble?' I returned, sitting down by the bed. It wrung my heart to talk of Charlie, but I knew the history of his suffering and patience would teach Phœbe a valuable lesson.

An hour passed by unheeded, and when I had finished I exclaimed at the lateness of the hour.

'Ay, you have tired yourself; you look quite pale,' was her answer; 'but you have made me forget myself for the first time in my life.' She stopped, and then with more effort continued, 'Come again to-morrow, and I will tell you my trouble; it is worse than yours, and has made me the crazy creature you see. Yes, I will tell you all about it'; but, half crying, as though she had little hope of contesting my will, 'You will not leave that picture to make my heart ache more than it does now?'

'My poor Phœbe,' I said, kissing her, 'when your heart once aches for the thought of another's sorrow your healing will have begun. Let that picture say to you what no one has said to you before, "that all your life you have been an idolater, that you have worshipped only yourself and one other——"'

'Whom? What do you mean? Have you heard of Robert?' she asked excitedly.

'To-morrow is Sunday,' I returned, touching her softly. 'I am going to church in the morning, and I shall not be here until evening; but we shall have time then for a long talk, and you shall tell me everything.' And then, without waiting for an answer, I left the room. It was late indeed. Miss Locke had long returned, and was busying herself over her sister's supper; she held up her finger to me smiling as I passed, and I peeped in.

Kitty was lying on the rug, fast asleep, with the doll in her arms.

'I found them like this when I came in,' whispered Miss Locke; 'she must have been listening to the music and fallen asleep. How late you have stopped with Phœbe! it is nearly eight o'clock!'

'I do not think the time has been wasted,' I answered cheerfully, as I bade her good-night and stepped out into the darkness. Is time ever wasted, I wonder, when we stop in our daily work to give one of these weak ones a cup of cold water? It is not for me to answer; only our recording angel knows how some such little deed of kindness may brighten some dim struggling life that seems over-full of pain.

CHAPTER XII

A MISSED VOCATION

It was pleasant to wake to bright sunshine the next morning, and to hear the sparrows twittering in the ivy.

It had been my intention to set apart Sunday as much as possible as a day of rest and refreshment. Of course I could not expect always to control the various appeals for my help or to be free from my patients, but by management I hoped to secure the greater part of the day for myself.

I had told Peggy not to expect me at the cottage until the afternoon; everything was in such order that there was no necessity for me to forgo the morning service. My promise to Phœbe Locke would keep me a prisoner for the evening, but I determined that her sister and Kitty should be set free to go to church, so my loss would be their gain.

I thought of Jill as I dressed myself. She had often owned to me that the Sundays at Hyde Park Gate were not to her taste. Visitors thronged the house in the afternoon; Sara discussed her week's amusements with her friends or yawned over a novel; the morning's sermon was followed as a matter of course by a gay luncheon party. 'What does it mean, Ursula?' Jill would say, opening her big black eyes as widely as possible: 'I do not understand. Mr. Erskine has been telling us that we ought to renounce the world and our own wills, and not to follow the multitude to do foolishness, and all the afternoon mother and Sara having been talking about dresses for the fancy-ball. Is there one religion for church and another for home? Do we fold it up and put it away with our prayer-books in the little book-cupboard that father locks so carefully?' finished Jill, with girlish scorn.

Poor Jill! she had a wide, generous nature, with great capabilities, but she was growing up in a chilling atmosphere. Young girls are terribly honest; they dig down to the very root of things; they drag off the swathing cloths from the mummy face of conventionality. What does it mean? they ask. Is there truth anywhere? Endless shams surround them; people listen to sermons, then they shake off the dust of the holy place carefully from the very hem of their garments; their religion, as Jill expressed it, is left beside their prayer-books. Ah! if one could but see clearly, with eyes purged from every remnant of earthliness,—see as the angels do,—the thick fog of unrisen and unprayed prayers clinging to the rafters of every empty church, we might well shudder in the clogging heavy atmosphere.

Jill had not more religion than many other girls, but she wanted to be true; the inconsistency of human nature baffled and perplexed her; she was not more ready to renounce the world than Sara was, but she wished to know the inner meaning of things, and in this I longed to help her. I could not help thinking of her tenderly and pitifully as I walked down the road leading to the little Norman church. I was early, and the building was nearly empty when I entered the porch; but it was quiet and restful to sit there and review the past week, and watch the sunshine lighting up the red brick walls and touching the rood-screen, while a faint purple gleam fell on the chancel pavement.

Two ladies entered the seat before me, and I looked at them a little curiously.

They were both very handsomely dressed, but it was not their fashionable appearance that attracted me. I had caught sight of a most beautiful and striking face belonging to one of them that somehow riveted my attention.

The lady was apparently very young, and had a tall graceful figure, and strange colourless hair that looked as though it ought to have been golden, only the gloss had faded out of it; but it was lovely hair, fine and soft as a baby's.

As she rose she slightly turned round, and our eyes met for a moment; they were large, melancholy eyes, and the face, beautiful as it was, was very worn and thin, and absolutely without colour. I could see her profile plainly all through the service, but the dull impassive expression of the countenance that she had turned upon me gave me a sensation of pain; she

looked like a person who had experienced some great trouble or undergone some terrible illness. I could not make up my mind which it could be.

The other lady was much older, and had no claims to beauty. I could see her face plainly, for she looked round once or twice as though she were expecting some one.

She must have been over thirty, and had rather a singular face; it was thin, dark-complexioned, and very sallow; she was a stylish-looking woman, but her appearance did not interest me. To my surprise, just as the service commenced, Mr. Hamilton came in and joined them. So these must be the ladies from Gladwyn, I thought. That beautiful pale girl must be his sister Gladys, and the other one Miss Darrell.

I tried to keep my attention to my own devotions, but every now and then my eyes would stray to the lovely face before me. Mr. Hamilton's behaviour was irreproachable. I could hear his voice following all the responses, and he sang the hymns very heartily.

I think he knew I was behind him, for he handed me a hymn-book, with a slight smile, when I was offering to share mine with a young woman. Miss Darrell gave me a curiously penetrating look when she came out that did not quite please me, but the girl who followed her did not seem to notice my presence. I sat still in my place for a minute, as I did not wish to encounter them in the porch. I had lingered so long that the congregation had quite dispersed when I got out, but, to my surprise, I could see the three walking very slowly down the road. Could they have been waiting for me? I wondered; but I dismissed this idea as absurd.

But I could not forget the face that had so interested me; and when I encountered Uncle Max on his way to the children's service I questioned him at once about the two ladies.

'Yes, you are right, Ursula,' he said, a little absently. 'The one with fair hair was Miss Gladys: her cousin, Miss Darrell, sat by Hamilton.'

'But you never told me how beautiful she was,' I replied, in rather an injured voice. 'She has a perfect face, only it is so worn and unhappy-looking.'

'You must not keep me,' observed Max hurriedly; 'Miss Darrell wants to speak to me before service.' And he rushed off, leaving me standing in the middle of the path rather wondering at his abruptness, for the bell had not commenced.

A little farther on, I came face to face with Miss Darrell; she was walking with Mr. Tudor, and seemed talking to him with much animation.

She bowed slightly, as he took off his hat to me, in a graceful well-bred manner, but her face prepossessed me even less than it had done in the morning. She had keen, dark eyes like Mr. Hamilton's, only they somehow repelled me. I was somewhat quick with my likes and dislikes, as I had proved by the dislike I had taken to Mr. Hamilton. This feeling was wearing off, and I was no longer so strongly prejudiced against him. I might even find Miss Darrell less repelling when I spoke to her. She was evidently a gentlewoman; her movements were quiet and graceful, and she had a good carriage.

I was somewhat surprised on reaching the cottage to find Mr. Hamilton sitting by my patient. He had Janie on his knee, and seemed as though he had been there for some time, but he rose at once when he saw me.

'I was waiting for you, Miss Garston,' he said quietly. 'I wanted to give you some directions about Mrs. Marshall'; and when he had finished, he said, a little abruptly—

'What made you so long coming out of church this morning? I was waiting to introduce my sister and cousin to you, but you were determined to disappoint me.'

I was a little confused by this.

'Did you recognise me?' I asked, rather tamely.

'No,—not in that smart bonnet,' was the unexpected reply. 'I did not identify the wearer with the village nurse until I heard your voice in the Te Deum: you can hardly disguise your voice, Miss Garston: my cousin Etta pricked up her ears when she heard it.' And then, as I made no answer, he picked up his hat with rather an amused air and wished me good-bye.

I was rather offended at the mention of my bonnet; the little gray wing that relieved its sombre black trimmings could hardly be called smart,—a word I abhorred,—but he probably said it to tease me.

'Ay, the doctor has been telling us you have a voice like a skylark,' observed Elspeth, 'but I have been thinking it must be more like an angel's voice, my bairn, since you mostly use it to sing the Lord's praises, and to cheer the sick folk round you: that is more than a skylark does.'

So he had been praising my voice. What an odd man!

I stayed at the cottage about two hours, and read a little to the children and Elspeth, and then I started for the Lockes'.

Kitty clapped her hands when she heard she was to go to church with her aunt Susan. I found out afterwards the child had always gone alone.

Phœbe was evidently expecting me, for her eyes were fixed on the door as I entered, and the same shadowy smile I had seen once before swept over her wan features when she saw me. She seemed ready and eager to talk, but I adhered to my usual programme. I was rather afraid that our conversation would excite her, so I wanted to quiet her first. I sang a few of my favourite hymns, and then read the evening psalms. She heard me somewhat reluctantly, but when I had finished her face cleared, and without any preamble she commenced her story.

I never remember that recital without pain. It positively wrung my heart to listen to her. I had heard the outline of her sad story from her sister's lips, but it had lacked colour; it had been a simple statement of facts, and no more.

But now Phœbe's passionate words seemed to clothe it with power; the very sight of the ghastly and almost distracted face on the pillow gave a miserable pathos to the story. It was in vain to check excitement while the unhappy creature poured out the history of her wrongs: the old old story, of a credulous woman's heart being trampled upon and tortured by an unworthy lover, was enacted again before me.

'I just worshipped the ground he walked on, and he threw me aside like a broken toy,' she said over and over again. 'And the worst of it is that, villain as he is, I cannot unlove him, though I am that mad with him sometimes that I could almost murder him.'

'Love is strong as death, and jealousy is cruel as the grave,' I muttered, half to myself, but she overheard me.

'Ay, that is just true,' she returned eagerly: 'there are times when I hate Robert and Nancy and would like to haunt them. Did I not tell you, Miss Garston, that hell had begun with me already? I was never a good woman,—never, not even when I was happy and Robert loved me. I was just full of him, and wanted nothing else in heaven and earth; and when the trouble came, and father and mother died, and I lay here like a log,—only a log has not got a living heart in it,—I seemed to go mad with the anger and unhappiness, and I felt "the worm that dieth not, and the fire that is not quenched."'

I stooped over and wiped her poor lips and poor head, for she was fearfully exhausted, and then in a perfect passion of pity closed her face between my hands and bade God bless her.

'What do you mean?' she said, staring at me; but her voice trembled. 'Haven't I been telling you how wicked I am? Do you think that is a reason for His blessing me?'

'I think His blessing has always been with you, my poor Phœbe, like the sunlight that you try to shut out from your windows. You hide yourself in your own darkness, and pretend that the all-embracing love is not for you. Well may you call your present existence a tomb; but you must not wrong your Almighty Father. Not He, but you yourself have walled yourself up with your own sinful hands, and then you wonder at the weight that lies upon your heart.'

'Can I forget my trouble when I am not able to move?' she said bitterly. And it was sad to see how her hands beat upon the bedclothes. But I held them in mine. They were icy cold. The action seemed to calm her frenzy.

'You cannot forget,' I returned quietly; 'but all this time, all these weary years, you might have learned to forgive Robert.'

'Nay, I will have nothing to do with forgiving,' was the hard answer.

'And yet you say you love him, Phœbe. Why, the very devils would laugh at such a notion of love.'

'Didn't I say I both loved and hated him?' very fiercely.

'Speak the truth, and say you hate him, and God forgive you your sin. But it is a greater one than Robert has committed against you.'

'How dare you say such things to me, Miss Garston?' trying to free her hands; but still I held them fast. 'You will make me hate you next. I am not a pleasant-tempered woman.'

'If you do, I will promise you forgiveness beforehand. Why, you poor creature, do you think I could ever be hard on you?'

The fierce light in her eyes softened. 'Nay, I did not mean what I said; but you excite me with your talk. How can you know what I feel about these things? You cannot put yourself in my place.'

'The heart knoweth its own bitterness, Phœbe; and it may be that in your place I should fail utterly in patience; but if we will not lie still under His hand, and learn the lesson He

would fain teach us, it may be that fresh trials may be sent to humble us.'

'Do you think things could be much worse with me?' becoming excited again; but I stroked her hand, and begged her gently to let me finish my speech.

'Phœbe, as you lie there on your cross, the whole Church throughout the world is praying for you Sunday after Sunday when the prayer goes up for those who are desolate and oppressed. And who so desolate and oppressed as you?'

'True, most true,' she murmured.

'You are cradled in the supplications of the faithful. A thousand hearts are hearing your sorrows, and yet you say impiously that you are on the border-land of hell; but no, you will never go there. There are too many marks of His love upon you. All this suffering has more meaning than that.'

It is impossible to describe the look she gave me; astonishment, incredulity, and something like dawning hope were blended in it; but she remained silent.

'You have missed your vocation, that is true. You were set apart here to do most divine work; but you have failed over it. Still, you may be forgiven. How many prayers you might have prayed for Robert! You might have been an invisible shield between him and temptation. There is so much power in the prayers of unselfish love. This room, which you describe as a tomb, or an antechamber of hell, might have been an inner sanctuary, from which blessings might flow out over the whole neighbourhood. Silent lessons of patience might have been preached here. Your sister's weary hands might have been strengthened. You could have mutually consoled each other; and now——' I paused, for here conscience completed the sentence. I saw a tear steal under her eyelid, and then course slowly down her face.

'I have made Susan miserable, I know that; and she is never impatient with me if I am ever so cross with her. Ah, I deserve my punishment, for I have been a selfish, hateful creature all my life. I do think sometimes that an evil spirit lives in me.'

'There is One who can cast it out; but you must ask Him, Phœbe. Such a few words will do: "Lord help me!" Now we have talked enough, and Susan will be coming back from church. I mean to sing you the evening hymn, and then I

must go.' And, almost before I had finished the last line, Phœbe, exhausted with emotion, had sunk into a refreshing sleep, and I crept softly out of the room to watch for Susan's return.

I felt strangely weary as I walked home. It was almost as though I had witnessed a human soul struggling in the grasp of some evil spirit. It was the first time I had ever ministered to mental disease. Never before had I realised what self-will, unchastened by sorrow and untaught by religion, can bring a woman to. Once or twice that evening I had doubted whether the brain were really unhinged; but I had come to the conclusion that it was only excess of morbid excitement.

My way home led me past the vicarage. Just as I was in sight of it, two figures came out of the gate and waited to let me pass. One of them was the churchwarden, Mr. Townsend, and the other was Mr. Hamilton. It was impossible to avoid recognition in the bright moonlight; but I was rather amazed when I heard Mr. Hamilton bid Mr. Townsend good-night, and a moment after he overtook me.

'You are out late to-night, Miss Garston. Do you always mean to play truant from evening service?'

I told him how I had spent my time, but I suppose my voice betrayed inward fatigue, for he said, rather kindly,—

'This sort of work does not suit you; you are looking quite pale this evening. You must not let your feelings exhaust you. I am sorry for Phœbe myself, but she is a very tiresome patient. Do you think you have made any impression on her?'

He seemed rather astonished when I briefly mentioned the subject of our talk.

'Did she tell you about herself? Come, you have made great progress. Let her get rid of some of the poison that seems to choke her, and then there will be some chance of doing her good. She has taken a great fancy to you, that is evident; and, if you will allow me to say so, I think you are just the person to influence her.'

'It is a very difficult piece of work,' I returned; but he changed the subject so abruptly that I felt convinced that he knew how utterly jaded I was. He told me a humorous anecdote about a child that made me laugh, and when we reached the gate of the cottage he bade me, rather peremptorily,

put away all worrying thoughts and to go to bed, which piece of advice I followed as meekly as possible, after first reading a passage out of my favourite *Thomas à Kempis*; but I thought of Phœbe all the time I was reading it:

'The cross, therefore, is always ready, and everywhere waits for thee. Thou canst not escape it wheresoever thou runnest; for wheresoever thou goest, thou carriest thyself with thee and shalt ever find thyself. . . . If thou bear the cross cheerfully, it will bear thee, and lead thee to the desired end, namely, where there shall be an end of suffering, though here there shall not be. If thou bear it unwillingly, thou makest for thyself a (new) burden, and increasest thy load, and yet, notwithstanding, thou must bear it.'

CHAPTER XIII

LADY BETTY

THE next evening I was refused admittance to Phœbe's room. Miss Locke met me at the door, looking more depressed than usual, and asked me to follow her into the kitchen, where we found Kitty in the rocking-chair by the hearth, dressing her new doll.

'It is just as she treated the vicar and Mr. Tudor,' she observed disconsolately. 'I don't quite know what ails her to-day; she had a beautiful night, and slept like a baby, and when I took her breakfast to her she put her arms round my neck and asked me to kiss her,—a thing she has not done for a year or more; and she went on for a long time about how bad she had been to me, and wanting me to forgive her and make it up with her.'

'Well?' I demanded, rather impatiently, as Susan wiped her patient eyes and took up her sewing.

'Well, poor lamb! I told her I would forgive her anything and everything if she would only let me go on with my work, for I had Mrs. Druce's mourning to finish; but she would not let me stir for a long time, and cried so bitterly—though she says she never can cry—that I thought of sending for you or Dr. Hamilton. But she cried more when I mentioned you, and said, No, she would not see you; you had left her more miserable than she was before: and she made me promise to send you away if you came this evening, which I am loath to do after all your kindness to her.'

'I have brought her some fresh flowers this evening,' was my reply. 'Do not distress yourself, Miss Locke; we must

expect Phœbe to be contrary sometimes.' And the words came to my mind, 'And ofttimes it casteth him into the fire, and oft into the water.' 'You have discharged your duty, but I am not going just yet. Let me help you with that work. I am very fond of sewing, and that is a nice easy piece. Shall you mind if I sing to you and Kitty a little?'

I need not have asked the question when I saw the fretted look pass from Miss Locke's face.

'It is the greatest pleasure Kitty and I have, next to going to church,' she said humbly. 'Your voice does sound so sweet; it soothes like a lullaby. It is my belief,' speaking under her breath so that the child should not hear her, 'that she is just trying to punish herself by sending you away.'

I thought perhaps this might be the case, for who could understand all the perversities of a diseased mind? But if Phœbe's will was strong for evil, mine was stronger still to overcome her for her own good. I was determined on two things: first, that I would not leave the house without seeing her; and, secondly, that nothing should induce me to stay with her after this reception. She must be disciplined to civility at all costs. Max had been wrong to yield to her sick whims.

I must have sung for a long time, to judge by the amount of work I contrived to do, and if I had sung like a whole nestful of skylarks I could not have pleased my audience more. I was sorry to set Miss Locke's tears flowing, because it hindered her work; tears are such a simple luxury, but poor folk cannot always afford to indulge in them.

I had just commenced that beautiful song, 'Waft her, angels, through the air,' when the impatient thumping of a stick on the floor arrested me; it came from Phœbe's room.

'I will go to her,' I said, waving Miss Locke back and picking up my flowers. 'Do not look so scared: she means those knocks for me.' And I was right in my surmise. I found her lying very quietly, with the traces of tears still on her face; she addressed me quite gently.

'Do not sing any more, please; I cannot bear it; it makes my heart ache too much to-night.'

'Very well,' I returned cheerfully. 'I will just mend your fire, for it is getting low, and put these flowers in water, and then I will bid you good-night.'

'You are vexed with me for being rude,' she said, almost

timidly. 'I told Susan to send you away, because I could not bear any more talk. You made me so unhappy yesterday, Miss Garston.'

I was cruel enough to tell her that I was glad to hear it, and I must have looked as though I meant it.

'Oh, don't,' she said, shrinking as though I had dealt her a blow. 'I want you to unsay those words: they pierce me like thorns. Please tell me you did not mean them.'

'How can I know to what you are alluding?' I replied, in rather an unsympathetic tone; but I did not intend to be soft with her to-day: she had treated me badly and must repent her ingratitude. 'I certainly meant every word I said yesterday.'

To my great surprise, she burst into tears, and repeated word for word a fragment of a sentence that I had said.

'It haunts me, Miss Garston, and frightens me somehow. I have been saying it over and over in my dreams,—that is what upset me so to-day: "if we will not lie still under His hand,"—yes, you said that, knowing I have never lain still for a moment,—"and if we will not learn the lesson He would fain teach us, it may be that fresh trials may be sent to humble us."'

Pity kept me silent for a moment, but I knew that I must not shirk my work.

'I am sorry if the truth pains you, Phœbe, but it is no less the truth. How am I to look at you and think that God has finished His work?'

She put up both her hands and motioned me away with almost a face of horror, but I took no notice. I arranged the flowers and tended the fire, and then offered her some cooling drink, which she did not refuse, and then I bade her good-night.

'What!' she exclaimed, 'are you going to leave me like that, and not a word to soothe me, after making me so unhappy? Think of the long night I have to go through.'

'Never mind the length of the night, if only you can hear His voice in the darkness. You wanted to send me away, Phœbe; well, and to-morrow I shall not come; I shall stay at home and rest myself. You can send me away, and little harm will happen; but take care you do not send Him away.' And I left the room.

When I told Miss Locke that I was not coming the next

evening she looked frightened. 'Has my poor Phœbe offended you so badly, then?' she asked tremulously.

'I am not offended at all,' I replied; 'but Phœbe has need to learn all sorts of painful lessons. I shall have all the warmer welcome on Wednesday, after leaving her to herself a little.' But Miss Locke only shook her head at this.

The next day was so lovely that I promised myself the indulgence of a long country walk; there was a pretty village about two miles from Heathfield that I longed to see again. But my little plan was frustrated, for just as I was starting I heard Tinker bark furiously; a moment afterwards there was a rush and scuffle, followed by a shriek in a girlish treble; in another moment I had seized my umbrella and flown to the door. There was a fight going on between Tinker and a large black retriever, and a little lady in brown was wandering round them, helplessly wringing her hands, and crying, 'Oh, Nap! poor Nap!'

I took her for a child the first moment, she was so very small. 'Do not be frightened, my dear,' I said soothingly, 'I will make Tinker behave himself.' And a well-aimed blow from my umbrella made him draw off growling. In another moment I had him by the collar, and by dint of threats and coaxing contrived to shut him up in the kitchen. He was not a quarrelsome dog generally, but, as I heard afterwards, Nap was an old antagonist; they had once fallen out about Peter, and had never been friends since.

I found the little brown girl sitting in the porch with her arms round the retriever's neck; she was kissing his black face, and begging him to forget the insult he had received from that horrid Barton dog.

'Poor old Tinker is not horrid at all, I assure you,' I said, laughing; 'he is a dear fellow, and I am already very fond of him.'

'But he nearly killed Nap,' she returned, with a little frown; 'he is worse than a savage, for he has no notion of hospitality. Nap and I came to call,' rising with an air of great dignity. 'I suppose you are Miss Garston. I am Lady Betty.'

I had never heard of such a person in Heathfield; but of course Uncle Max would enlighten me. As I looked at her more closely I saw my mistake in thinking she was a child; little brown thing as she was, she was fully grown up, and, though not in the least pretty, had a bright piquant face, a *nez retroussé*, and a pair of mischievous eyes.

She was dressed rather extravagantly in a brown velvet walking-dress, with an absurd little hat, that would have fitted a child, on the top of her dark wavy hair; she only wanted a touch of red about her to look like a magnified robin-redbreast.

'Well,' she said impatiently, as I hesitated a moment in my surprise, 'I have told you we have come for a call, Nap and I; but if you are going out——'

'Oh, that is not the least consequence,' I returned, waking up to a sense of my duty. 'I am very pleased to see you and Nap; but you must not stop any longer in this cold porch; the wind is rather cutting. There is a nice fire in my parlour.' And I led the way in.

I was rather puzzled about Nap, for I seemed to recognise his sleek head and mild brown eyes; and yet where could I have seen him? He trotted in contentedly after his mistress, and stretched himself out on the rug Tinker's fashion; but Lady Betty, instead of seating herself, began to walk round the room and inspect my books and china, making remarks upon everything in a brisk voice, and questioning me in rather an inquisitive manner about sundry things that attracted her notice; but, to my great surprise and relief, she passed Charlie's picture without remark or comment—only I saw her glancing at it now and then from under her long lashes. This mystified me a little; but I thought her whole behaviour a little peculiar. I had never before seen callers on their first visit perambulating the room like polar bears, or throwing out curious feelers everywhere. As a rule, they sat up stiffly enough and discussed the weather.

Lady Betty was evidently a character; most likely she prided herself on being unlike other people. I was just beginning to wish that she would sit down and let me question her in my turn, when she suddenly put up her eye-glasses and burst into a most musical little laugh.

'Oh, do come here, Miss Garston; this is too amusing! There goes her majesty Gladys of Gladwyn, accompanied by her prime minister. Don't they look as though they were walking in the Row?—heads up—everything in perfect trim! They are coming to call—yes!—no!—They are going to the Cockaignes first. What an escape! my dear creature, if they come here I shall fly to Mrs. Barton. The prime minister's airs will be too much for my gravity.'

I gave her a very divided attention, for I was watching

Miss Hamilton and her companion with much interest. I could see that Miss Darrell was chatting volubly; but Miss Hamilton's face looked as grave and impassive as it had looked on Sunday. When they had passed out of sight I turned to Lady Betty rather eagerly; she had dropped her eye-glasses, but an amused smile still played round her lips.

'*La belle cousine* is improving the occasion as usual. Poor Gladys, how bored she looks! but there is no escape for her this afternoon, for the prime minister has her in tow. I wonder from what text she is preaching? Ezekiel's dry bones, I should think, from her majesty's face.'

'Do you know the Hamiltons of Gladwyn very intimately?' I asked innocently; but I grew rather out of patience when Lady Betty first lifted her eye-glass and stared at me, with the air of a non-comprehending kitten, and then buried her face in a very fluffy little muff in a fit of uncontrolled merriment.

I was provoked by this, and determined not to say a word. So presently she came out of her muff and asked me, with mirthful eyes, for whom I took her.

'You are Lady Betty, I understood,' was my stiff response.

'Yes, of course; every one calls me that, except the vicar, who will address me as Miss Elizabeth. I never will answer to that name; I hate it so. The servants up at Gladwyn never dare to use it. I would get Etta to dismiss them if they did. Is it not a shame that people should not have a voice in the matter of their name,—that helpless infants should be abandoned to the tender mercies of some old fogey of a sponsor? Miss Garston, if I were ever to hear you address me by that name it would be the death-warrant to our friendship.'

'Let me know who you really are first, and then I will promise not to offend your peculiar prejudice.'

'Dear me!' she answered pettishly, 'you talk just like Giles. He often laughs at me and makes himself very unpleasant. But then, as I often tell him, philanthropists are not pleasant people with whom to live; a man with a hobby is always odious. Well, Miss Garston, if you will be so prying, my name is Elizabeth Grant Hamilton; only from a baby I have been called Lady Betty.'

'I shall remember,' I replied quietly, for really the little thing seemed quite ruffled. This was evidently more than a whim on her part. 'It would have seemed to me a liberty to

use a family pet name. But of course if you wish me to do so——'

'I do wish it,' rather peremptorily. 'That is partly why Mr. Cunliffe and I are not good friends,—that, and other reasons.'

'Oh, I am sorry you do not like Uncle Max,' I said, rather impulsively; but she drew herself up after the manner of an aggrieved pigeon. She was rather like a bright-eyed bird, with her fluffy hair and quick movements.

'Oh, I like him well enough, but I do not understand him. Men are not easy to understand. He is quiet, but he is disappointing. We must not expect perfection in this world,' finished the little lady sententiously.

'I have never met any one half as good as Uncle Max,' was my warm retort. 'He is the most unselfish of men.'

'Unselfish men make mistakes sometimes,' she returned drily. 'Giles and he are great friends. He is up at Gladwyn a great deal; so is Mr. Tudor. Mr. Tudor is not a finished character, but he has good points, and one can tolerate him. There, how vexing, we were just beginning to talk comfortably, and I see the shadow of her majesty's gown at the gate. Come, Nap, we must fly to Mrs. Barton's for refuge. *Au revoir*, Miss Garston.' And, kissing her little gloved hand, this strangest of Lady Betties vanished, followed by the obedient Nap.

My pulses quickened a little at the prospect of seeing the beautiful face of Gladys Hamilton in my little room; but it was not she who entered first, but Miss Darrell, whose sharp incisive glance had taken in every detail of my surroundings before her faultlessly-gloved hand had released mine; and even when I turned to greet Miss Hamilton, her peculiar and somewhat toneless voice claimed my attention.

'How very fortunate,' she began, seating herself with elaborate caution with her back to the light. 'We hardly hoped to find you at home, Miss Garston. My cousin Giles informed us how much engaged you were. We have been so interested in what Mr. Cunliffe told us about it. It is such a romantic scheme, and, as I am a very romantic person, you may be sure of my sympathy. Gladys, dear, is this not a charming room? Positively you have so altered and beautified it that I can hardly believe it is the same room. I told a friend of ours, Mrs. Saunders, that it would never suit her, as it was such a shabby little place.'

'It is very nice,' returned Miss Hamilton quietly. 'I hope,' fixing her large, beautiful eyes on me, 'that you are comfortable here? We thought perhaps you might be a little dull.'

'I have no time to be dull,' I returned, smiling, but Miss Darrell interrupted me.

'No, of course not; busy people are never dull. I told you so, Gladys, as we walked up the road. Depend upon it, I said, Miss Garston will hardly have a minute to give to our idle chatter. She will be wanting to get to her sick people, and wish us at Hanover. Still, as my cousin Giles said, we must do the right thing and call, though I am sure you are not a conventional person; neither am I. Oh, we are quite kindred souls here.'

I tried to receive this speech in good part, but I certainly protested inwardly against the notion that Miss Darrell and I would ever be kindred souls. I felt an instinctive repugnance to her voice; its want of tone jarred on me; and all the time she talked, her hard, bright eyes seemed to dart restlessly from Miss Hamilton to me. I felt sure that nothing could escape their scrutiny; but now and then, when one looked at her in return, she seemed to veil them most curiously under the long curling lashes.

She was rather an elegant-looking woman, but her face was decidedly plain. She had thin lips and rather a square jaw, and her sallow complexion lacked colour. One could not guess her age exactly, but she might have been three- or four-and-thirty. I heard her spoken of afterwards as a very interesting-looking person; certainly her figure was fine, and she knew how to dress herself,—a very useful art when women have no claim to beauty.

Miss Darrell's voluble tongue seemed to touch on every subject. Miss Hamilton sat perfectly silent, and I had not a chance of addressing her. Once, when I looked at her, I could see her eyes were fixed on my darling's picture. She was gazing at it with an air of absorbed melancholy: her lips were firmly closed, and her hands lay folded in her lap.

'That is the picture of my twin-brother,' I said softly, to arouse her.

To my surprise, she turned paler than ever, and her lips quivered.

'Your twin brother, yes; and you have lost him?' But here Miss Darrell chimed in again:

'How very interesting! What a blessing photography is, to be sure? Do you take well, Miss Garston? They make me a perfect fright. I tell my cousins that nothing on earth will induce me to try another sitting. Why should I endure such a martyrdom, if it be not to give pleasure to my friends?'

To my surprise, Miss Hamilton's voice interrupted her: it was a little like her step-brother's voice, and had a slight hesitation that was not in the least unpleasant. She spoke rather slowly: at least it seemed so by comparison with Miss Darrell's quick sentences.

'Etta, we have not done what Giles told us. We hope you will come and dine with us to-morrow, Miss Garston, without any ceremony.'

'Dear me, how careless of me!' broke in Miss Darrell, but her forehead contracted a little, as though her cousin's speech annoyed her. 'Giles gave the message to me, but we were talking so fast that I quite forgot it. My cousin will have it that you are dull, and our society may cheer you up. I do not hold with Giles. I think you are far too superior a person to be afraid of a little solitude; strong-minded people like you are generally fond of their own society; but all the same I hope you do not mean to be quite a recluse.'

'We dine at seven, but I hope you will come as much earlier as you like,' interposed Miss Hamilton. 'No one will be with us but Mr. Tudor.'

'You forget Mr. Cunliffe, Gladys,' observed Miss Darrell, in rather a sharp voice. 'I am sure I do not know what the poor man has done to offend you; but ever since last summer——' But here Miss Hamilton rose with a gesture that was almost queenly, and her impassive face looked graver than ever.

'I did not know you had invited Mr. Cunliffe, Etta, or I should certainly have mentioned him. Good-bye, Miss Garston: we shall look for you soon after six.'

There was something wistful in her expression; it seemed as though she wanted me to come, and yet I was a complete stranger to her. I felt very reluctant to dine at Gladwyn, but that look overruled me.

'I will try to come early,' was my answer, and then I drew back to let them pass.

Miss Darrell bade me good-bye a little stiffly; something had evidently put her out. As they went down the narrow garden

path I could see she was speaking to Miss Hamilton rather angrily, but Miss Hamilton seemed to take no notice.

What did it all mean? I wondered; and then I suddenly bethought myself of my other visitor. I had wholly forgotten her existence in my interest in her beautiful sister. What could have become of Lady Betty?

CHAPTER XIV

LADY BETTY LEAVES HER MUFF

THIS question was speedily answered.

The gate had scarcely closed behind my visitors when I heard a gay little laugh behind me, and Lady Betty tripped across the passage and took possession of the easy-chair in the friendliest way.

'Now we can have a chat and be cosy all by ourselves,' she said, with childish glee; and then she stopped and looked at me, and her rosy little mouth began to pout, and a sort of baby frown came to her forehead.

'You don't seem pleased to see me again. Shall I go away? Are you busy, or tired, or is there anything the matter?' asked Lady Betty, in an extremely fractious voice.

'There is nothing the matter, and I am delighted to see you, and'—with a sudden inspiration—'if you will be good enough to stay and have tea with me I will ask Mrs. Barton to send in one of her excellent tea-cakes.'

This was evidently what Lady Betty wanted, for she nodded and took off her hat, and began to unbutton her long tan-coloured gloves in a cool, business-like way that amused me. I ran across to the kitchen, and gave Mrs. Barton a *carte blanche* for a sumptuous tea, and when I returned I found Lady Betty quite divested of her walking-apparel, and patting her dark fluffy hair to reduce it to some degree of smoothness. She had a pretty little head, and it was covered by a mass of short curly hair that nothing would reduce to order.

'This is just what I like,' she said promptly. 'When Giles told us about you, and I made up my mind to call, I

hoped you would ask me to stay. I do dislike stiffness and conventionality excessively. I hope you mean to be friends with us, Miss Garston, for I have taken rather a fancy to you, in spite of your grave looks. Dear me! do you always look so grave?'

'Oh no,' I returned, laughing.

'That is right,' with an approving nod; 'you look ever so much nicer and younger when you smile. Well, what did the prime minister say? Was she very gushing and sympathetic? Did she patronise you in a lady-like way, and pat you on the head metaphorically, until you felt ready to box her ears? Ah! I know *la belle cousine's* little ways.'

This was so exact a description of my conversation with Miss Darrell that I laughed in a rather guilty fashion. Lady Betty clapped her hands delightfully.

'Oh, I have found you out. You are not a bit solemn, really, only you put on the airs of a sister of mercy. So you don't like Etta; you need not be afraid of telling me so; she is the greatest humbug in the world, only Giles is so foolish as to believe in her. I call her a humbug because she pretends to be what she is not; she is really a most prosaic sort of person, and she wants to make people believe that she is a soft romantic body.'

'You are not very charitable in your estimate of your cousin, Lady Betty.'

'Then she should not lead Gladys such a life. Poor dear majesty, to be ruled by her prime minister! I should like to see Etta try to dictate to me. Why, I should laugh in her face. She would not attempt it again. I can't think how it is,' looking a little grave, 'that she has Gladys so completely under her thumb. Gladys is too proud to own that she is afraid of her, but all the same she never dares to act in opposition to Etta.'

Lady Betty's confidence was rather embarrassing, but I hardly knew how to check it. I began to think the household at Gladwyn must be a very queer one. Uncle Max had already hinted at a want of harmony between Mr. Hamilton and his step-sisters, and Miss Darrell seemed hardly a favourite with him, although he was too kind-hearted to say so openly.

'Has your cousin lived long with you?' I ventured to ask.

'Oh yes; ever since Gladys and I were little things; before mamma died. Auntie lived with us too: poor auntie, we were

very fond of her, but she was a sad invalid; she died about three years ago. Etta has managed everything ever since.'

'Do you mean that Miss Darrell is housekeeper? I should have thought that would have been your sister's place.'

'Oh, Gladys is called the mistress of her house, but none of the servants go to her for orders. If she gives any, Etta is sure to countermand them.'

'It is partly Gladys's fault,' went on Lady Betty, in her frank outspoken way. 'She tried for a little while to manage things; but either she was a terribly bad housekeeper, or Etta undermined her influence in the house; everything went wrong, and Giles got so angry,—men do, you know, when the dear creatures' comforts are invaded: so there was a great fuss, and Gladys gave it up; and now the prime minister manages the finances, and gives out stores, and, though I hate to say it, things never went more smoothly than they do now. Giles is scarcely ever vexed.'

I am ashamed to say how much I was interested in Lady Betty's childish talk, and yet I knew it was wrong not to check her. What would Miss Hamilton say if she were to hear of our conversation? Jill was rather a reckless talker, but she was nothing compared with this daring little creature. Lady Betty told me afterwards, when we were better acquainted, that it had amused her so to see how widely I could open my eyes when I was surprised. I believe she did it out of pure mischief.

Our talk was happily interrupted by the appearance of Mrs. Barton and the tea-tray, which at once turned Lady Betty's thoughts into a new channel.

There was so much to do. First she must help to arrange the table, and, as no one else could cut such thin bread-and-butter, she must try her hand at that. Then Nap must have his tea before we touched ours; and when at last we did sit down she was praising the cake, and jumping up for the kettle, and waiting upon me 'because I was a dear good thing, and waited on poor people,' and coaxing me to take this or that as though I were her guest, and every now and then she paused to say 'how nice and cosy it was,' and how she was enjoying herself, and how glad she felt to miss that stupid dinner at Gladwyn, where no one talked but Giles and Etta, and Gladys sat as though she were half asleep, until she, Lady Betty, felt inclined to pinch them all.

We were approaching the dangerous subject again, but I warded it off by asking how she and her sister employed their time.

She made a little face at me, as though the question bothered her. 'Oh, I do things, and Gladys — does things,' rather lucidly.

'Well, but what things, may I ask?'

'Why do you want to know?' was the unexpected retort. 'I don't question you, do I? Giles says women are dreadfully curious.'

'I think you are dreadfully mysterious; but, as you are evidently ashamed of your occupations, I will withdraw my question.'

'I do believe you are cross, Miss Garston: you are not a saint, after all, though Giles says you sing like a cherub: I don't know where he ever heard one, but that is his affair. Well, as you choose to get pettish over it, I will be amiable, and tell you what we do. Etta says we waste our time dreadfully, but as it is our time and not hers, it is none of her business.'

I thought it prudent to remain silent, so she wrinkled her brows and looked perplexed.

'Gladys—let me see what Gladys does: well, she used to teach in the schools, but she does not teach now; she says the infants make her head ache; that is why she has dropped the Sunday-school. Now Etta has her class. Then there was the mothers' meeting; well, I never knew why she gave that up, —I wonder if she knows herself,—but Etta has got it. And she has left off singing at the penny readings and village entertainments; Etta would have replaced her there, only she has no voice. I think she works a little for the poor people at the East End of London, but she does it in her own room, because Etta laughs at her and calls her 'Madam Charity.' Gladys hates that. She takes long walks, and sketches a little, and reads a good deal; and—there, that is all I know of her majesty's doings.'

Poor Miss Hamilton! it certainly did not sound much of a life.

'And about yourself, Lady Betty?'

'Oh, Lady Betty is here, there, and everywhere,' mimicking me in a droll way. 'Lady Betty walks a little, talks a little, plays a little, and dances when she gets a chance. At

present, lawn-tennis is a great object in her life; last winter, swimming in Brill's bath and riding from Hove to Kemp Town or across the Brighton Downs were her hobbies. In the summer a gardening craze seized her, and just now she is in an idle mood. What does it matter? a short life and a merry one, —eh, Miss Garston?'

I would not expostulate with this civilised little heathen, for she was evidently bent on provoking a lecture, and I determined to disappoint her. We had sat so long over our tea that the room was quite dark, and I rose to kindle the lamp. Lady Betty, as usual, was anxious to assist me, and went to the window to lower the blind. The next moment I heard an exclamation of annoyance, and as she came back to the table her little brown face was all aglow with some suppressed irritation.

'What is the matter, Lady Betty?' I asked, in some surprise.

'It is that provoking Etta again,' she began. 'She has guessed where I am, and has sent for me, the meddlesome old——' But here a tap at our room door stopped her outburst.

As Lady Betty made no response, I said, 'Come in,' and immediately a respectable-looking woman appeared in the doorway.

She looked like a superior lady's-maid, and had a plain face much marked by the smallpox, and rather dull light-coloured eyes.

'Well, Leah,' demanded Lady Betty, rather sulkily, 'what is your business with Miss Garston?'

'My business is with you, Lady Betty,' returned the woman good-humouredly. 'Master came in just now and asked where you were; I think he told Miss Darrell that it was too late for you to be out walking: so Miss Darrell said she believed you were at the White Cottage, for she saw your muff lying on Miss Garston's table; so she told me to step up here, as it was too dark for you to walk alone, and I was to tell you that they would be waiting dinner.'

'It is just like her interference,' muttered Lady Betty. 'But I suppose there would be a pretty fuss if I let the dinner spoil. Help me on with my jacket, Leah; as you have come when no one wanted you, you had better make yourself useful.'

She spoke with the peremptoriness of a spoiled child, but the woman smiled pleasantly and did as she was bid. She seemed

a civil sort of person, evidently an old family servant. Something had struck me in her speech. Miss Darrell had seen Lady Betty's muff, and knew of her presence in the cottage, and yet she had made no remark on the subject; this seemed strange, but would she not wonder still more at my silence?

'Lady Betty,' I said hastily, as this occurred to me, 'your cousin will think it odd that I never spoke of you this afternoon; but you ran out of the room so quickly, and then I forgot all about it.'

'Oh, Etta will know I was only playing at hide-and-seek. Most likely she will think I bound you to secrecy. What a goose I was to leave my muff behind me,—the very one Etta gave me, too! why, she would see a pin; nothing escapes her: does it, Leah?'

'Not much, Lady Betty: she has fine eyes for dust, I tell her. The new housemaid had better be careful with her room. Now, ma'am, if you are ready?'

'Good-bye, Miss Garston; we shall meet to-morrow,' returned Lady Betty, standing on tiptoe to kiss me, and as they went out I heard her say in quite a friendly manner to Leah, as though she had already forgotten her grievance,—

'Is not Miss Garston nice, Leah? She has got such a kind face.' But I did not hear Leah's reply.

I had not seen the last of my visitors, for about an hour afterwards, as I was finishing a long chatty letter to Jill, there was the sharp click of the gate again, and Uncle Max came in.

'Are you busy, Ursula?' he said apologetically, as I looked up in some surprise. 'I only called in as I was passing. I am going on to the Myers's: old Mr. Myers is ill and wants to see me.' But for all that Max drew his accustomed chair to the fire, and looked at the blazing pine-knot a little dreamily.

'You keep good fires,' was his next remark. 'It is very cold to-night: there is a touch of frost in the air; Tudor was saying so just now. So you have had the ladies from Gladwyn here this afternoon?'

'How do you know that?' I asked, in a sharp pouncing voice, for I was keeping that bit of news for a tidbit.

'Oh, I met them,' he returned absently, 'and they told me that you were to dine with them to-morrow. I call that nice and friendly, asking you without ceremony. What time shall you be ready, Ursula? for of course I shall not let you go alone the first time.'

I was glad to hear this, for, though I was not a shy person, my first visit to Gladwyn would be a little formidable; so I told him briefly that I would be ready by half-past six, as they wished me to go early, and it would never do to be formal on my side. And then I gave him an account of Lady Betty's visit, but it did not seem to interest him much: in fact, I do not believe that he listened very attentively.

'She is an odd little being,' he said, rather absently, 'and prides herself on being as unconventional as possible. They have spoiled her among them, Hamilton especially, but her droll ways amuse him. She has sulked with me lately because I will not give in to her absurd fad about Lady Betty. I tell her that she ought not to be ashamed of her baptismal name; the angels will call her by it one day.'

'She is very amusing. I think I shall like her, Max; but Miss Darrell does not please me. She is far too gushing and talkative for my taste; she patronised and repressed me in the same breath. If there is anything I dislike, it is to be patted on the head by a stranger.'

'Miss Hamilton did not pat you on the head, I suppose.'

'Miss Hamilton! Oh dear, no; she is of another calibre. I have quite fallen in love with her: her face is perfect, only rather too pale, and her manners are so gentle, and yet she has plenty of dignity; she reminds me of Clytie, only her expression is not so contented and restful: she looks far too melancholy for a girl of her age.'

'Pshaw!' he said, rather impatiently, but I noticed he looked uncomfortable. 'What can have put such ideas in your head?—you have only seen her twice: you could not expect her to smile in church.'

Max seemed so thoroughly put out by my remark that I thought it better to qualify my speech. 'Most likely Miss Darrell had been nagging at her.'

His face cleared up directly. 'Depend upon it, that was the reason she looked so grave,' he said, with an air of relief. 'Miss Darrell can say ill-tempered things sometimes. Miss Hamilton is never as lively as Miss Elizabeth; she is always quiet and thoughtful; some girls are like that, they are not sparkling and frothy.'

I let him think that I accepted this statement as gospel, but in my heart I thought I had never seen a sadder face than that of Gladys Hamilton; to me it looked absolutely joyless, as

though some strange blight had fallen on her youth. I kept these thoughts to myself, like a wise woman, and when Max looked at me rather searchingly, as though he expected a verbal assent, I said, 'Yes, you are right, some girls are like that,' and left him to glean my meaning out of this parrot-like sentence.

I could make nothing of Max this evening: he seemed restless and ill at ease; now and then he fell into a brown study and roused himself with difficulty. I was almost glad when he took his leave at last, for I had a feeling somehow—and a curious feeling it was—that we were talking at cross-purposes, and that our speeches seemed to be lost hopelessly in a mental fog; the cipher to our meaning seemed missing.

But he bade me good-night as affectionately as though I had done him a world of good: and when he had gone I sat down to my piano and sang all my old favourite songs, until the lateness of the hour warned me to extinguish my lamp and retire to bed.

I was just sinking into a sweet sleep when I heard Nathaniel's voice bidding some one good-night, and in another moment I could hear firm quick footsteps down the gravel walk, followed by Nap's joyous bark.

Mr. Hamilton had been in the house all the time I had been amusing myself. I do not know why the idea annoyed me so. 'How I wish he would keep away sometimes!' I thought fretfully. 'He will think I am practising for to-morrow: I will not sing if they press me to do so.' And with this ill-natured resolve I fell asleep.

My dinner-engagement obliged me to go to Phœbe quite early in the afternoon. Miss Locke looked surprised as she opened the door, but she greeted me with a pleased smile.

'Phœbe will hardly be looking for you yet,' she said, leading the way into the kitchen in the evident expectation of a chat; 'she did finely yesterday in spite of her missing you; when I went in to her in the morning she quite took my breath away by asking if there were not an easier chair in the house for you to use. "'Deed and there is, Phœbe, woman," said I, quite pleased, for the poor thing is far too uncomfortable herself to look after other people's comforts, and it was such a new thing to hear her speak like that: so I fetched father's big elbow-chair with a cushion or two and his little wooden footstool, and there it stands ready for you this afternoon.'

'That was very thoughtful of Phœbe,' was my reply.

'Well, now, I thought you would be pleased, though it is only a trifle. But that is not all. Widow Drayton was sitting with me last afternoon, when all at once she puts up her finger and says, "Hark! Is not that your Kitty's voice?" And so I stole out into the passage to listen. And there, to be sure, was Kitty singing most beautifully some of the hymns you sang to Phœbe; and if she could not make out all the words she just went on with the tune, like a little bird, and Phœbe lay and listened to her, and all the time—as I could see through the crack of the door—her eyes were fixed on the picture you gave her, and I said to myself, "Phœbe, woman, this is as it should be. You may yet learn wisdom out of the lips of babes and sucklings."'

'I am very glad to hear all this, Miss Locke,' I returned cheerfully. 'Kitty will be able to take my place sometimes. She will be a valuable little ally. Now, as my time is limited, I will go to Phœbe.'

I was much struck by the changed expression on Phœbe's face as soon as I had entered the room. She certainly looked very ill, and when I questioned her avowed she had suffered a good deal of pain in the night; but the wild hard look had left her eyes. There was intense depression, but that was all.

She evidently enjoyed the singing as much as ever: and I took care to sing my best. When I had finished I produced a story that I thought suitable, and began to read to her. She listened for about half an hour before she showed a symptom of weariness. At the first sign I stopped.

'Will you do something to please me in return?' I asked, when she had thanked me very civilly. 'I want you to go on with this book by yourself now. I know what you are going to say—that you never read—that it makes your head ache and tires you. But, if you care to please me, you will waive all these objections, and we can talk over the story to-morrow.' Then I told her about my invitation for this evening, and about the beautiful Miss Hamilton, whose sweet face had interested me. And when we had chatted quite comfortably for a little while I rose to take my leave.

Of course she could not let me go without one sharp little word.

'You have been kinder to me to-day,' she said, pausing slightly. 'I suppose that is because I let you take your own way with me.'

'Every one likes his own way,' I said lightly. 'If I have been kinder to you, as you say, possibly it is because you have deserved kindness more.' And I smiled at her and patted the thin hand, as though she were a child, and so 'went on my way rejoicing,' as they say in the good old Book.

CHAPTER XV

UP AT GLADWYN

UNCLE MAX had never been famous for punctuality. He was slightly Bohemian in his habits, and rather given to desultory bachelor ways; but his domestic timekeeper, Mrs. Drabble, ruled him most despotically in the matter of meals, and it was amusing to see how she kept him and Mr. Tudor in order: neither of them ventured to keep the dinner waiting, for fear of the housekeeper's black looks; such an offence they knew would be expiated by cold fish and burnt-up steaks. Uncle Max might invite the bishop to dine, but if his lordship chose to be late Mrs. Drabble would take no pains to keep her dinner hot.

'If gentlemen like to shilly-shally with their food, they must take things as they find them,' she would say; and if her master ever ventured to remonstrate with her, she took care that he should suffer for it for a week.

'We must humour Mother Drabble,' Mr. Tudor would say good-humouredly. 'Every one has a crotchet, and, after all, she is a worthy little woman, and makes us very comfortable. I never knew what good cooking meant until I came to the vicarage.' And indeed Mrs. Drabble's custards and flaky crust were famed in the village. Miss Darrell had once begged very humbly that her cook Parker might take a lesson from her, but Mrs. Drabble refused point-blank.

'There were those who liked to teach others, and plenty of them, but she was one who minded her own business and kept her own recipes. If Miss Darrell wanted a custard made she was willing to do it for her and welcome, but she wanted no gossiping prying cooks about her kitchen.'

As I knew Max's peculiarity, I was somewhat surprised when, long before the appointed time, Mrs. Barton came up and told me that Mr. Cunliffe was in the parlour. I had commenced my toilet in rather a leisurely fashion, but now I made haste to join him, and ran downstairs as quickly as possible, carrying my fur-lined cloak over my arm.

'You look very nice, my dear,' he said, in quite fatherly fashion. 'Have I ever seen that gown before?'

The gown in point had been given to me by Lesbia, and had been made in Paris: it was one of those thin black materials that make up into a charming demi-toilette, and was a favourite gown with me.

I always remember the speech Lesbia made as she showed it to me. 'When you put on this gown, Ursula, you must think of the poor little woman who hoped to have been your sister.' This was one of the pretty little speeches that she often made. Poor dear Lesbia! she always did things so gracefully. In Charlie's lifetime I had thought her cold and frivolous, for she had not then folded up her butterfly wings; but even then she was always doing kind little things.

It was a dark night, neither moon nor stars to be seen, and after we had passed the church the darkness seemed to envelop us, and I could barely distinguish the path. Max seemed quite oblivious of this fact, for he would persist in pointing out invisible objects of interest. I was told of the wide stretch of country that lay on the right, and how freshly the soft breezes blew over the downs.

'There is the asylum, Ursula,' he observed cheerfully, waving his hand towards the black outline. 'Now we are passing Colonel Maberley's house, and here is Gladwyn. I wish you could have seen it by daylight.'

I wished so too, for on entering the shrubbery the darkness seemed to swallow us up bodily, and the heavy oak door might have belonged to a prison. The sharp clang of the bell made me shiver, and Dante's lines came into my mind rather inopportunely, 'All ye who enter here, leave hope behind.' But as soon as the door opened the scene was changed like magic; the long hall was deliciously warm and light: it looked almost like a corridor, with its dark marble figures holding sconces, and small carved tables between them.

'I will wait for you here, Ursula,' whispered Uncle Max; and I went off in charge of the same maid that I had seen

before. Lady Betty had called her Leah, and as I followed her upstairs I thought of that tender-eyed Leah who had been an unloved wife.

Leah was very civil, but I thought her manner bordered on familiarity: perhaps she had lived long in the family, and was treated more as a friend than a servant. She was an exceedingly plain young woman, and her light eyes had a curious lack of expression in them, and yet, like Miss Darrell's, they seemed able to see everything.

Seeing me glance round the room,—it was a large, handsomely furnished bedroom, with a small dressing-room attached to it,—she said, 'This is Miss Darrell's room. Mrs. Darrell used to occupy it, and Miss Etta slept in the dressing-room, but ever since her mother's death she has had both rooms.'

'Indeed,' was my brief reply: but I could not help thinking that Miss Darrell had very pleasant and roomy quarters. There were evidences of luxury everywhere, from the bevelled glass of the walnut-wood wardrobe to the silver-mounted dressing-case and ivory brushes on the toilet-table. A pale embroidered tea-gown lay across the couch, and a book that looked very much like a French novel was thrown beside it. Miss Darrell was evidently a Sybarite in her tastes.

Uncle Max was waiting for me at the foot of the stairs, and took me into the drawing-room at once.

To our surprise, we found Miss Hamilton there alone. The room was only dimly lighted, and she was sitting in a large carved chair beside the fire with an open book in her lap.

I wonder if Max noticed how like a picture she looked. She was dressed very simply in a soft creamy cashmere, and her fair hair was piled up on her head in regal fashion: the smooth plaits seemed to crown her; a little knot of red berries that had been carelessly fastened against her throat was the only colour about her; but she looked more like Clytie than ever, and again I told myself that I had never seen a sweeter face.

She greeted me with gentle warmth, but she hardly looked at Max; her white lids dropped over her eyes whenever he addressed her, and when she answered him she seemed to speak in a more measured voice than usual. Max too appeared extremely nervous; instead of sitting down, he stood upon the bearskin rug and fidgeted with some tiny Chinese ornaments on the mantelpiece. Neither of them appeared at ease: was it possible that they were not friends?

'You are not often to be found in solitude, Miss Hamilton,' observed Max; and it struck me his voice was a little peculiar. 'I do not think I have ever seen you sitting alone in this room before.'

'No,' she answered quickly, and then she went on in rather a hesitating manner: 'Etta and Lady Betty have been shopping in Brighton, and they came back by a late train, and now Etta is shut up with Giles in his study. Some letters that came by this morning's post had to be answered.'

'Miss Darrell is Hamilton's secretary, is she not?'

'She writes a good many of his letters. Giles is rather idle about correspondence, and she helps him with his business and accounts. Etta is an extremely busy person.'

'Miss Hamilton used to be busy too,' returned Max quietly. 'I always considered you an example to our ladies. I lost one of my best workers when I lost you.'

A painful colour came into Miss Hamilton's face.

'Oh no,' she protested, rather feebly. 'Etta is far cleverer than I at parish work. Teaching does not make her head ache.'

'Yours used not to ache last summer,' persisted Uncle Max, but she did not seem to hear him. She had turned to me, and there was almost an appealing look in her beautiful eyes, as though she were begging me to talk.

'Oh, do you know, Miss Garston,' she said nervously, 'that Giles was very nearly sending for you last night? He was with Mrs. Blagrove's little girl until five this morning; the poor little creature died at half-past four, and he told us that he thought half a dozen times of sending for you.'

'I wish he had done so. I should have been so glad to help.'

'Yes, he knew that, but he said it would have been such a shame rousing you out of your warm bed; and he had not the heart to do it. So he stopped on himself; there was really nothing to be done, but the parents were in such a miserable state that he did not like to leave them. He was so tired this afternoon that he dropped asleep instead of writing his letters: that is why Etta has to do them.'

'Who is talking about Etta?' observed Miss Darrell, coming in at that moment, with a quick rustle of her silk skirt, looking as well-dressed, self-possessed, and full of assurance as ever. 'Why are you good people sitting in the dark? Thornton

would have lighted the candles if you had rung, Gladys; but I suppose you forgot, and were dreaming over the fire as usual. Miss Garston, I suppose I ought to apologise for being late, but we are such busy people here; every moment is of value; and though Gladys asked you to come early, I never thought you would be so good as to do so. Friendly people are scarce, are they not, Mr. Cunliffe? By the bye,' holding up a taper finger loaded with sparkling rings, 'I have a scolding in store for you. Why did you not examine my class as usual last Sunday?—the children tell me you never came near them.'

'I had so little time that I asked Tudor to take the classes for me,' he returned quickly, but he was looking at Miss Hamilton as he spoke. 'I am always sure of the children in that class: they have been so thoroughly well taught that there is very little need for me to interfere.'

'It would encourage their teachers if you were to do so,' returned Miss Darrell, smiling graciously, She evidently appropriated the praise to herself, but I am sure Uncle Max was not thinking of her when he spoke. Just then Lady Betty came into the room, followed by Mr. Tudor.

Lady Betty looked almost pretty to-night. She wore a dark ruby velveteen that exactly suited her brown skin; her fluffy hair was tolerably smooth, and she had a bright colour. She came and sat down beside me at once.

'Oh, I am so vexed that we are so late! but it was all Etta's fault: she would look in at every shop-window, and so of course we lost the proper train.'

'What does the child say?' asked Miss Darrell good-humouredly. She seemed in excellent spirits this evening; but how silent Miss Hamilton had become since her entrance! 'Of course poor Etta is blamed; she always is if anything goes wrong in the house; Etta is the family scapegoat. But who was it, I wonder, who wanted another turn on the pier? Not Etta, certainly.'

'Just as though those few minutes would have mattered; and I did want another look at the sea,' returned Lady Betty pettishly; 'but no, you preferred those stupid shops. That is why I hate to go into Brighton with you.' But Miss Darrell only laughed at this flimsy display of wrath.

Just then Mr. Tudor had taken the other vacant chair beside me. 'How is the village nurse?' he asked, in his bright way.

I certainly liked Mr. Tudor, he had such a pleasant, friendly way with him, and on his part he seemed always glad to see me. If I had ever talked slang, I might have said that we chummed together famously. He was a year younger than myself, and I took advantage of this to give him advice in an elder-sisterly fashion.

'You must take care that the clergy do not spoil the village nurse,' observed Miss Darrell, who had overheard him, and this time the taper finger was uplifted against Mr. Tudor.

'Oh, there is no fear of that,' he returned manfully; 'Miss Garston is too sensible to allow herself to be spoiled; but it is quite right that we all should make much of her.'

'We will ask Giles if he agrees with this,' replied Miss Darrell, in a funny voice, and at that moment Mr. Hamilton entered the room.

I do not know why I thought he looked nicer that evening: one thing, I had never seen him in evening dress, and it suited him better than his rough tweed; he was quieter and less abrupt in manner, more dignified and less peremptory, but he certainly looked very tired.

He accosted me rather gravely, I thought, though he said that he was glad to see me at Gladwyn. His first remark after this was to complain of the lateness of the dinner.

'Parker is not very punctual this evening, Etta,' he observed, looking at his watch.

'I think it was our fault, Giles,' returned his cousin plaintively. 'We kept Thornton such a long time in the study, and no doubt that is the cause of the delay. Parker is seldom a minute behindhand; punctuality is her chief point, as Mrs. Edmonstone told me when I engaged her. You see,' turning to Uncle Max, 'we are such a regular household that the least deviation in our nature quite throws us into confusion. I am so sorry, Giles, I am, indeed; but will you ring for Thornton, and that will remind him of his duty?'

Miss Darrell's submissive speech evidently disarmed Mr. Hamilton, and deprived him of his Englishman's right to grumble to his womankind: so he said, quite amiably, that they would wait for Parker's pleasure a little longer, and then relapsed into silence.

The next moment I saw him looking at me with rather an odd expression; it was as though he were regarding a stranger whom he had not seen before; I suppose the term 'taking

stock' would explain my meaning. Just then dinner was announced, and he gave me his arm.

The dining-room was very large and lofty, and was furnished in dark oak. A circular seat with velvet cushions ran round the deep bay-window. A small oval table stood before it. Dark ruby curtains closed in the bay.

My first speech to Mr. Hamilton was to regret that he had not sent for me the previous night.

'Oh no,' he said pleasantly. 'I am quite glad now that your rest was not disturbed.' And then he went on looking at me with the same queer expression that his face had worn before.

'Do you know, Miss Garston, your remark quite startled me? Somehow I do not seem to recognise my nurse to-night. When I came into the drawing-room just now I thought there was a strange young lady sitting by Tudor.'

Of course I was curious to know what he meant; but he positively refused to enlighten me, and went on speaking about his poor little patient.

'She was an only child; but nothing could have saved her. The Blagroves are well-to-do people,—Brighton shopkeepers,—so they hardly come under the category of your patients. Miss Garston, you call yourself a servant of the poor, do you not?'

'I should not refuse to help any one who really needed it,' was my reply. 'But, of course, if people can afford to hire service I should think my labour thrown away on them.'

'Ah! just so. But now and then we meet with a case where hirelings can give no comfort. With the Blagroves, for example, there was nothing to be done but just to watch the child's feeble life ebb away. A miracle only could have saved her; but all the same it was impossible to go away and leave them. They were young people, and had never seen death before.'

I was surprised to hear him speak with so much feeling. And I liked that expression 'servant of the poor.' It sounded to me as though he had at last grasped my meaning, and that I had nothing more to fear from his sarcasm.

I wondered what had wrought such a sudden change in him, for I had only worked such a few days. Certainly it would make things far easier if I could secure him as an ally; and I began to hope that we should go on more smoothly in the future.

Mr. Hamilton was evidently a man whom it would take long to know. His was by no means a character easy to read. One would be sure to be startled by new developments and curious contradictions. I had known him only for ten days; but then we had met constantly in that short time. I had seen him hard in manner and soft in speech, cool, critical, and disparaging, at one moment satirical and provoking, the next full of thoughtfulness and readiness to help. No wonder I found it difficult to comprehend him.

When we had finished discussing the Blagroves, Mr. Hamilton turned his attention to his other guests, and tried to promote the general conversation: this left me at liberty to make my own observations.

Miss Hamilton sat at the top of the table facing her brother, and Uncle Max and Mr. Tudor were beside her; but she did not speak to either of them unless they addressed her, and her replies seemed to be very brief. If I had been less interested in her I might have accused her of want of animation, for it is hardly playing the *rôle* of a hostess to look beautiful and be chary of words and smiles.

It was impossible to attribute her silence to absence of mind, for she followed with grave attention every word that was spoken; but for some inexplicable reason she had withdrawn into herself. Uncle Max left her to herself after a time, and began to talk politics with Mr. Hamilton, and Mr. Tudor was soon compelled to follow his example.

Poor Mr. Tudor! I rather pitied him, for his other neighbour, Lady Betty, had turned suddenly very sulky, and I had my surmises that Miss Darrell had said something to affront her; for she made snapping little answers when any one spoke to her, and, though they laughed at her, and nobody seemed to mind, most likely they thought it prudent to give her time to recover herself.

Miss Darrell's radiant good-humour was a strange contrast to her two cousins' silence. She threw herself gallantly into the breach, and talked fast and well on every topic broached by the gentlemen. She was evidently clever and well read, and had dabbled in literature and politics.

Her energy and vivacity were almost fatiguing. She seemed able to keep up two or three conversations at once. The lowest whisper did not escape her ear; if Mr. Hamilton spoke to me, I saw her watchful eye on us, and she joined in at once with

a sprightly word or two; the next moment she was answering Uncle Max, who had at last hazarded a remark to his silent neighbour. Miss Hamilton had no time to reply; her cousin's laugh and ready word were before her.

I found the same thing happen when Mr. Tudor addressed me: before he had finished his sentence she had challenged the attention of the table.

'Giles,' she said good-humouredly, 'do you know what Mr. Tudor said in the drawing-room just now, that it was the bounden duty of the Heathfield folk to spoil and make much of Miss Garston?'

Both Mr. Tudor and I looked confused at this audacious speech, but he tried to defend himself as well as he could.

'No, no, Miss Darrell, that was not quite what I said; the whole style of the sentence is too laboured to belong to me: "bounden duty,"—no, it does not sound like me at all.'

'We need not quarrel about terms,' she persisted; 'your meaning was just the same. Come, Mr. Tudor, you cannot unsay your own words, that it was right for you all to make much of Miss Garston.'

I thought this was spoken in the worst possible taste, and I am sure Mr. Hamilton thought so too, for he smiled slightly and said, 'Nonsense, Etta! you let your tongue run away with you. I daresay that was not Tudor's meaning at all; he is the most matter-of-fact fellow I know, and could not coin a compliment to save his life. Besides which, I expect he has found out by this time that it would be rather difficult to spoil Miss Garston. That cuts both ways, eh!' looking at me rather mischievously.

'Oh, if all the gentlemen are in conspiracy to defend Miss Garston, I will say no more,' returned Miss Darrell, with a shrug, but she did not say it quite pleasantly. 'Gladys dear, I think we had better retire before I am quite crushed: Giles's frown has quite flattened me out. Miss Garston, if you are ready,' making me a mocking little courtesy; but Miss Hamilton waited for me at the door and linked her arm in mine, taking possession of me in a graceful way that evidently pleased Max, for he looked at us smiling.

'Come into the conservatory, Gladys,' whispered Lady Betty in her sister's ear. 'Etta has a cold coming on, and will be afraid of following us.'

The conservatory led out of the drawing-room, and was

lighted by coloured lamps that gave a pretty effect; it was full of choice flowers, and two or three cane chairs filled up the centre. It was not so warm as the drawing-room, certainly, but it was pleasant to sit there in the dim perfumed atmosphere and peep through the open window at the firelight. Miss Darrell followed us to the window with a discontented air.

'I hope you are not going to stay there many minutes, Gladys: you will certainly give yourself and Miss Garston a bad cold if you do. There is something wrong with the warming-apparatus, and Giles says it will be some days before it will be properly warmed. I thought I told you so this morning.'

'I do not think Miss Garston will take cold, Etta, and it is very pleasant here'; but, though Miss Darrell retreated from the window, I think we all felt as much constrained as though she had joined us, for not a word could escape her ears if she chose to listen.

But this fact did not seem to daunt Lady Betty for long, for she soon began chattering volubly to us both.

'I am not so cross now as I was,' she said frankly. 'I am afraid I was very rude to Mr. Tudor at dinner; but what could I do when Etta was so impertinent? No, she is not there, Gladys; she has gone out of the room, looking as cross as possible. But what do you think she said to me?'

'Never mind telling us what she said, dear,' returned Miss Hamilton soothingly.

'Oh, but I want to tell Miss Garston: she looks dreadfully curious, and I do not like her to think me cross for nothing. I am not like that, am I, Gladys? Well, just before we went in to dinner, she begged me in a whisper not to talk quite so much to Mr. Tudor as I had done last time.—Now, what do you want, Leah?' pulling herself up rather abruptly.

'I have only brought you some shawls, Lady Betty, as Miss Darrell says the conservatory is so cold. She has told Thornton to mention to his master when he takes in the coffee that Miss Gladys is sitting here, and she hopes he will forbid it.'

'You can take away the shawls, Leah,' returned Miss Hamilton quietly, but there was a scornful look on her pale face as she spoke. 'We are not going to remain here, since Miss Darrell is so anxious about our health. Shall we come in, Miss Garston?—Perhaps it is a trifle chilly here.' And, seeing how the wind blew, and that Miss Darrell was determined to have her way in the matter, I acquiesced silently; but I was

not a bit surprised to see Lady Betty stamp her little foot as she followed us.

Miss Darrell was lying back on a velvet lounge, and welcomed us with a provoking smile.

'I thought the threat of telling Giles would bring you in, Gladys,' she said, laughing. 'What a foolish child you are to be so reckless of your health! Every one knows Gladys is delicate,' she went on, turning to me; 'everything gives her cold. Giles has been obliged to forbid her attending evening service this winter: you were terribly rebellious about it, were you not, my dear? but of course Giles had his way. No one in this house ventures to disobey him.'

Miss Hamilton did not answer: she was standing looking into the fire, and her lips were set firmly as though nothing would make her unclose them.

'Oh, do sit down,' continued her cousin pettishly; 'it gives one such an uncomfortable feeling when a tall person stands like a statue before one.' And as Miss Hamilton quietly seated herself, she went on, 'Don't you think religious people are far more self-willed than worldly ones, Miss Garston? I daresay you are self-willed yourself. Gladys made as much fuss about giving up evening service as though her salvation depended on her going twice or three times a day. "What is to prevent you reading the service in your own room?" I used to say to her. "It cannot be your duty to disobey your brother and make yourself ill."'

'The illness lay in your own imagination, Etta,' observed Miss Hamilton coldly. 'Giles would never have found out my chest was delicate if you had not told him so.'

Miss Darrell gave her favourite little shrug, and inspected her rings.

'See what thanks I get for my cousinly care,' she said good-humouredly. 'I suppose, Gladys, you were vexed with me for telling him that you were working yourself to death,—that the close air of the schoolroom made your head ache, and that so much singing was too much for your strength.'

'If you please, Etta, we will talk about some other subject: my health, or want of health, will not interest Miss Garston.' She spoke with dignity, and then, turning to me with a winning smile, 'Giles has told me about your singing. Will you be good enough to sing something to us? It would be a great pleasure: both Lady Betty and I are so fond of music.'

'Miss Garston looks very tired, Gladys; it is almost selfish to ask her,' observed Miss Darrell softly; and then I knew that Miss Hamilton's request did not please her.

I had vowed to myself that no amount of pressing should induce me to sing that evening, but I could not have refused that gentle solicitation. As I unbuttoned my gloves and took my place at the grand piano, I determined that I would sing anything and everything that Miss Hamilton wished; Miss Darrell should not silence me; and with this resolve hot on me I commenced the opening bars of 'The Lost Chord,' and before I had finished the song Miss Hamilton had crept into the corner beside me, and remained there as motionless as though my singing had turned her into stone.

CHAPTER XVI

GLADYS

I DO not know how the majority of people feel when they sing, but with me the love of music was almost a passion. I could forget my audience in a moment, and would be scarcely aware if the room were empty or crowded.

For example, on this evening I had no idea that the gentlemen had entered the room, and the first intimation of the fact was conveyed to me by hearing a 'Bravo!' uttered by Mr. Hamilton under his breath.

'But you must not leave off,' he went on, quite earnestly. 'I want you to treat us as you treat poor Phœbe Locke, and sing one song after another until you are tired.'

I was about to refuse this request very civilly but decidedly, for I had no notion of obeying such an arbitrary command, when Miss Hamilton touched my arm.

'Oh, do please go on singing as Giles says: it is such a pleasure to hear you.' And after this I could no longer refuse.

So I sang one song after another, chiefly from memory, and sometimes I could hear a soft clapping of hands, and sometimes there was breathless silence, and a curious feeling came over me as I sang. I thought that the only person to whom I was singing was Miss Hamilton, and that I was pleading with her to tell me the reason of her sadness, and why there was such a weary, hopeless look in her eyes, when the world was so young with her and the God-given gift of beauty was hers.

I was singing as though she and I were alone in the room, when Max suddenly whispered in my ear, 'That will do, Ursula,' and as soon as the verse concluded I left off. But before I could rise Miss Darrell was beside us.

'Oh, thank you so much, Miss Garston; you are very amiable to sing so long. Giles was certainly loud in your praises, but I was hardly prepared for such a treat. Why, Gladys dear, have you been crying? What an impressionable child you are! Miss Garston has not contrived to draw tears from my eyes.'

But, without making any reply, Miss Hamilton quietly left the room. Were her eyes wet, I wonder? Was that why Max stopped me? Did he want to shield her from her cousin's sharp scrutiny? If so, he failed.

'It is such a pity Gladys is so foolishly sensitive,' she went on, addressing Uncle Max: 'natures of this sort are quite unfit for the stern duties of life. I am quite uneasy about her sometimes, am I not, Giles? Her spirits are so uneven, and she has so little strength. Parochial work nearly killed her, Mr. Cunliffe. You said yourself how ill she looked in the summer.'

'True; but I never thought the work hurt her,' replied Max, rather bluntly. 'I think it was a mistake for Miss Hamilton to give up all her duties; occupation is good for every one.'

'That is my opinion,' observed Mr. Hamilton. 'Etta is always making a fuss about Gladys's health, but I tell her there is not the least reason for alarm; many people not otherwise delicate take cold easily. It is true I advised her to give up evening service for a few weeks until she got stronger.'

'Indeed!' And here Max looked a little perplexed. 'I thought you told me, Miss Darrell, that your cousin found our service too long and wearisome, and this was the reason she stayed away.'

'Oh no; you must have misunderstood me,' returned Miss Darrell, flushing a little. 'Gladys may have said she liked a shorter sermon in the evening, but that was hardly her reason for staying away; at least——'

'Of course not. What nonsense you talk, Etta!' observed Mr. Hamilton impatiently. 'You know what a trouble I had to coax Gladys to stay at home; she was rather obstinate about it,—as girls are,—but I asked her as a special favour to myself to remain.'

Max's face cleared up surprisingly, and as Miss Hamilton at that moment re-entered the room, he accosted her almost eagerly.

'Miss Hamilton, we have been talking about you in your

absence; your brother and I have been agreeing that it is really a great pity that you should have given up all your parish duties; it is a little hard on us all, is it not, Tudor? Your brother declares occupation will do you good. Now, I am sure your cousin will not have the slightest objection to give up your old class, and she can take Miss Matthews's, and then I shall have two good workers instead of one.'

For an instant Miss Hamilton hesitated; her face relaxed, and she looked at Max a little wistfully; but Miss Darrell interposed in her sprightly way:

'Do as you like, Gladys dear. Mr. Cunliffe will be too glad of your help, I am sure, as he sees how much you wish it. We all think you are fretting after your old scholars; home duties are not exciting enough, and even Giles notices how dull you are. Oh, you shall have my class with pleasure; anything to see you happy, love. Shall we make the exchange to-morrow?'

'No, thank you, Etta; I think things had better be as they are.' And Miss Hamilton walked away proudly, and spoke to Mr. Tudor; the sudden brightness in her face had dimmed, and I was near enough to see that her hand trembled.

'There, you see,' observed Miss Darrell complacently. 'I have done my best to persuade her in public and private to amuse herself and not give way to her feelings of lassitude. "Do a little, but not much," I have often said to her; but with Gladys it must be all or none.'

'Ursula, do you know how late it is?' asked Max, coming up to me. He looked suddenly very tired, and I saw at once that he wished me to go: so I made my adieux as quickly as possible, and in a few minutes we had left the house, accompanied by Mr. Tudor.

Uncle Max was very quiet all the way home. I had expected him to be full of questions as to how I had enjoyed my evening, but his only remark was to ask if I were very tired, and then he left me to Mr. Tudor.

'Well, how do you like the folks up at Gladwyn?' demanded Mr. Tudor. 'Lady Betty was not in the best of humours to-night, and hardly deigned to speak to me; but I am sure you must have admired Miss Hamilton.'

'I like both of them,' was my temperate reply: 'you must not be hard on poor little Lady Betty. Miss Darrell had been lecturing her, and that made her cross.'

'So I supposed,' was the prompt answer. 'Well, what did you think of the Dare-all,—as the vicar calls her sometimes? is she not like a pleasant edition of Tupper's *Proverbial Philosophy*, —verbose and full of long sentences? How many words did she coin to-night, do you think?'

There was a little scorn in the young man's voice. Miss Darrell was evidently not a favourite in the vicarage, yet most people would have called her elegant and well-mannered, and, if she had no beauty, she was not bad-looking. She was so exceedingly well made up, and her style of dress was so suitable to her face, that I was not surprised to hear afterwards from Lady Betty that many people thought her cousin Etta handsome. Now when Mr. Tudor made this spiteful little speech I felt rather pleased, for my dislike to Miss Darrell had increased rather than diminished by the evening's experiences; under her smooth speeches there lurked an antagonistic spirit; something had prejudiced her against me even at our first meeting; I was convinced that she did not like me, and would not encourage my visit to Gladwyn. Mr. Tudor and I talked a good deal about Lady Betty; he described her as most whimsical and sound-hearted, half-child and half-woman, with a touch of the brownie; her brother often called her Brownie, or little Nix, to tease her. She was very fond of her sister, he went on to say, but there was not much companionship between them. Miss Hamilton was very intellectual, and read a good deal, and Lady Betty never read anything but novels; they all made a pet of her,—even Mr. Hamilton, who was not much given to pets,—but she was hardly an influence in the house.

'She has not backbone enough,' he finished, 'and the Dare-all rules them all with a rod of iron—"cased in velvet."'

Uncle Max listened to all this in silence, and as they parted with me at the gate of the White Cottage he only said 'Good-night, Ursula,' in a depressed voice. He was evidently rather cast down about something; perhaps Miss Hamilton's decision had disappointed him; she had been his favourite worker, and had helped him greatly; he seemed to feel it hard that she should withdraw her services so suddenly. How wistfully she had looked at him as he pleaded with her! it was the first time I had seen her look at him of her own accord, and yet she had denied his request,—very firmly and gently.

'I must be friends with her, and then perhaps she will tell me all about it some day,' I thought; for I was convinced that

there was more than met the eye; but it was some time before I could banish these perplexing thoughts.

I saw a good deal of Lady Betty during the next week or two. I met her frequently on my way to the Lockes', and she would walk with me to the gate, and two or three times she made her appearance at the Marshalls'; 'for it's no use calling at the White Cottage of an afternoon,' she would say disconsolately, 'for you are never at home, you inhospitable creature.'

'Why, do you think I live here, Lady Betty!' I returned, smiling. 'Do you know I am becoming a most punctual person? I am always back at the White Cottage by five, and sometimes a little earlier, and I shall always be pleased if you will come in and have tea with me.'

'I should like it of all things,' replied Lady Betty, with a sigh; 'and I will come sometimes, you will see if I don't. But I know Etta will make a fuss; she always does if I stay out after dark; and it is dark at four now. That is why I pop in here to see you, because Etta is always busy in the mornings and never takes any notice of what we do.'

'But surely Miss Darrell will not object to your coming to see me?' I asked, somewhat piqued at this.

'Oh dear, no,' returned Lady Betty, jumbling her words as though she found my question embarrassing. 'Etta never objects openly to anything we do, only she throws stumbling-blocks in our way. I do not know why I have got it into my head that she would not like Gladys or me to come here without her, but it is there all the same,—the idea, I mean; it was something she said the other night to Mrs. Maberley that gave me this impression. Mrs. Maberley wanted to call on you, because she said you were Mr. Cunliffe's niece, and people ought to take notice of you. And Etta said, "Oh dear, yes; and it was a very kind thought on Mrs. Maberley's part, and Mr. Cunliffe would think it so. That was why Giles had invited you to Gladwyn. But there was no hurry, and you evidently were not prepared to enter into society. You had rather strong-minded views on this subject, and she was not quite sure whether Giles was wise to encourage the intimacy with his sisters."'

'Miss Darrell said this to Mrs. Maberley?'

'Yes. Was it not horrid of Etta? I felt so cross. And Mrs. Maberley is such an old dear: only rather old-fashioned in her notions about girls. So Etta's speech rather frightened her,

I could see. Of course she has not called yet? I am almost inclined to tell Giles about it.'

'Indeed, I hope you will do nothing of the kind, Lady Betty. I am sorry Miss Darrell does not like me; but I do not see that it matters so very much what people think of us.'

'Yes; but when Etta takes a dislike to people she tries to prevent us from knowing them: that is the provoking part of it. She is so dreadfully jealous, and I expect it was your singing that gave umbrage. Etta is not at all accomplished; she never cared much for Gladys to sing, because she had such a sweet voice, and it put her in the background. Ah! I know how mean it sounds, but it is just the truth about Etta. And if I were to drop in for five-o'clock tea, as you say, Leah would be sure to make her appearance and say I was wanted at Gladwyn.'

I found Lady Betty's confidential speeches rather embarrassing, and when I knew her a little better I took her to task rather seriously for her want of reticence. But she only pouted, and said, 'When one looks at you, Miss Garston, one cannot help telling you things: they all tumble out without one's will. That is what Gladys means when she says you have a sympathetic face. I wish you would get her to talk to you.'

As Lady Betty persisted in haunting the Marshalls' cottage, I determined to make her useful. So I set her to read to Elspeth, or to give sewing-lessons to Peggy, or to amuse the younger children, while I was engaged with my patient; and I soon found that she was a most helpful little body.

Mr. Hamilton found her sitting in the kitchen one day surrounded by the children. She was telling them a story. The baby was sucking her thumb contentedly on her lap. Poor Mary was worse that day, and I had begged Lady Betty to keep the little ones quiet.

Mr. Hamilton came into the sick-room looking very much pleased. 'I only wish you could make Lady Betty a useful member of society, Miss Garston,' he said, with one of the rare smiles that always lit up his dark face so pleasantly. 'She is a good little thing, but she wants ballast. As a rule, young ladies are terribly idle.'

I had called up at Gladwyn a few days after we had dined there, but, to my great disappointment, I did not see Miss Hamilton. Miss Darrell was alone, so my visit was as brief as possible.

She told me at once that her cousins had gone over to

Brighton for an afternoon's shopping, and that Mr. Hamilton had run up to London for a few hours. And then she commenced plying me with questions in a ladylike way about my work and my past life, but in such a skilful manner that it was almost impossible to avoid answering. She was so sure that I must be dull, living all alone. Oh, of course I was too good and unselfish to say so, but all the same I must be miserably dull. What could have put such a singular idea in my head, she wondered. When young ladies did this sort of thing there was generally some painful reason: they were unhappy at home, or they had had some disastrous love-affair. Of course—laughing a little affectedly—she had no intention of hinting at such a reason in my case; any one could see at a glance that I was not that sort of person; I was far too sensible and matter-of-fact: gentlemen would be quite afraid of me, I was so strong-minded. But all the same she pleaded guilty to a feeling of natural curiosity why such an idea had come into my head.

When I had warded off this successfully,—for I declined to enlighten Miss Darrell on this subject,—she flew off at a tangent to Aunt Philippa.

'It was such a pity when relations did not entirely harmonise. An aunt could never replace a mother. Ah! she knew that too well: and when there were daughters—and she had heard from Mr. Cunliffe that my cousin Sara was excessively pretty and charming—no doubt there would be natural misunderstandings and jealousies. In spite of all my goodness, I was only human. Of course she understood perfectly how it all happened, and she felt very sorry for me.'

I disclaimed the notion of any family disagreement with some warmth, but I do not think she believed me. She had evidently got it into her head that I was a strong-minded young woman with an uncertain temper, who could not live peaceably at home. No doubt she had hinted this to Mrs. Maberley and other ladies. She would make this the excuse for discouraging any degree of intimacy with her cousins. I should not be asked very often to Gladwyn if it depended on Miss Darrell; but Mr. Hamilton had a will of his own, and if he chose me as a companion for his sisters, Miss Darrell would find it difficult to exclude me.

One could see at a glance that Mr. Hamilton was master in his own house. Miss Darrell seemed perfectly submissive to him. There was something almost obsequious in her manner to

him. She watched his looks anxiously, and, though she coaxed and flattered him, she did not seem quite certain how he would take her speeches.

'We are a strange household; don't you think so, Miss Garston?' she observed presently. 'Giles is our lord and master. None of us poor women dare to contradict him. When dear mamma was alive, she had a great deal of influence over him. He was very fond of her. Her death made a great difference in the house.'

'It must have been a great trouble to you, Miss Darrell.'

'Yes, indeed. I was almost broken-hearted. She had been the dearest and most indulgent of mothers; but Giles was very good to me. Gladys and Lady Betty were very devoted to her; perhaps you have heard them speak of Aunt Margaret. Ah! I forgot, you have only seen Gladys twice.' And here she looked at me rather sharply, but I nodded acquiescence. 'Gladys was always a favourite with her.'

'Miss Hamilton must be a general favourite,' I replied, a little unguardedly.

'Ah! I suppose you think her handsome,' in rather a forced manner: 'many people say she is too pale, and rather too statuesque, for their taste.'

'In my opinion she is very beautiful,' I replied quickly. 'I told Uncle Max the other day that I thought her face almost perfect.'

'And what did he say?' she asked, rather eagerly. 'Did he agree with you?' But I was obliged to confess that I had forgotten his answer.

'I know Mr. Cunliffe thinks Gladys cold,' she went on. 'He is too kind-hearted to say so; but I know he feels hurt at her desertion of her post. It was a strange whim on her part to give up all her parish work. I am afraid it was a little bit of temper. Gladys has a temper, though you may not think so. She is very firm, and does not brook the least interference on my part. Poor dear! if it were not wrong, I should say she was a little jealous of my influence with Giles, because he likes me to do things for him; but how am I to help doing what he asks me, when I owe the very bread I eat to his kindness?'

Miss Darrell was poor and dependent then. This piece of news surprised me. I thought of the glittering rings and silver-mounted dressing-case and all the luxurious appliances in her toilet, and wondered if Mr. Hamilton had paid for them.

Miss Darrell seemed to read my thoughts in a most wonderful way.

'Poor mother left very little except personal jewellery. Yes, I owe everything to Giles's generosity. He is good enough to say that I earn my allowance,—and indeed I am never idle; but,' interrupting herself, 'I do not want to talk of myself; I am a very insignificant person,—just Giles's housekeeper; Gladys is mistress of the house. I only wanted you to explain to Mr. Cunliffe that I am not to blame for Gladys's strange whim. Let me explain a little. She was looking very ill and overworked, and I begged Giles to lecture her. I told him that there was no need for Gladys to do quite so much; in fact, she was putting herself a little too forward in the parish, considering how young she was, and the vicar an unmarried man. So Giles and I gave her a word. I am sure he spoke most gently, and I was very careful indeed in only giving her a hint that people, and even Mr. Cunliffe, might misconstrue such devotion. I never saw Gladys in such a passion; and the next day she had flung everything up. She told the vicar that the schoolroom made her head ache, and that her throat was delicate, and she could not sing. Poor Mr. Cunliffe was in such despair that I was obliged to offer my services. It is far too much for me; but what can I do? the parish must not suffer for Gladys's wilfulness. Now if you could only explain things a little to Mr. Cunliffe; he looked so hurt the other night when Gladys refused to take her old class. No wonder he misses her, for she used to teach the children splendidly; but if he knew it was only a little temper on Gladys's part he would look over it and be friends with her again. But you must have noticed yourself, Miss Garston, how little he had to say to her.'

I had found it impossible to check Miss Darrell's loquacity or to edge in a single word; but as soon as her breath failed I rose to take my leave, and she did not seek to detain me.

'You will explain this to Mr. Cunliffe, for Gladys's sake,' she said, holding my hand. 'I do want him to think well of her, and I can see his good opinion is shaken.'

But to this I made no audible reply; but, as I shook off the dust of Gladwyn, I told myself that Uncle Max should not hear Miss Darrell's version from my lips. She wished to make me a tool in her hands; but her breach of confidence had a very different result from what she expected. Miss Darrell's

words had cleared up a perplexity in my mind: I could read between the lines, and I fully exonerated Miss Hamilton.

The following afternoon I had a most unexpected pleasure. When I came back to the cottage after my day's work Mrs. Barton met me at the door and told me that Miss Hamilton was in the parlour.

I had thought she meant Lady Betty; but, to my surprise, I found Miss Hamilton seated by the fire. A pleased smile came to her face as I greeted her most warmly. She must have seen how glad I was; but she shrank back rather nervously when I begged her to take off her furred mantle and stay to tea.

She was not sure that she could remain. Lady Betty was alone, as Giles and Etta were dining at the Maberleys'. She had been asked, and had refused; but Etta had taken in her work, as Mrs. Maberley had wanted them to go early. Perhaps she had better not stay, as it would not be kind to Lady Betty. But I soon overruled this objection. I told Miss Hamilton that I saw Lady Betty frequently, but that she herself had never called since her first visit, and that now I could not let her go.

I think she wanted me to press her; she was arguing against her own wishes, it was easy to see that. By and by she asked me in a low voice if I were sure to be alone, or if I expected any visitors; and when I had assured her decidedly that no one but Uncle Max ever came to see me, and that I knew he was engaged this evening, her last scruple seemed to vanish, and she settled herself quite comfortably for a chat. We talked for a little while on indifferent subjects. She told me about the neighbourhood and the people who lived in the large houses by the church, and about her brother's work in the parish, and how if rich people sent for him he always kept them waiting while he went to the poor ones.

'Giles calls himself the poor people's doctor: he attends them for nothing. He cannot always refuse rich people if they will have him, but he generally sends them to Dr. Ramsbotham. You see, he never takes money for his services, and as people know this, they are ashamed to send for him; and yet they want him because he is so clever. Giles is so fond of his profession; he is always regretting that he had a fortune left him, for he says it would have been far pleasanter to make one. Giles never did care for money; he is ready to fling it away to any one who asks him.'

Miss Hamilton kept up this desultory talk all tea-time. She spoke with great animation about her brother, and I could hardly believe it was the same girl who had sat so silently at the head of the table that evening at Gladwyn. The sad abstracted look had left her face. It seemed as though for a little while she was determined to forget her troubles.

When Mrs. Barton had taken away the tea-tray, she asked me, with the same wistful look in her eyes, to sing to her if I were not tired, and I complied at once.

I sang for nearly half an hour, and then I returned to the fireside. I saw that Miss Hamilton put up her hand to shield her face from the light; but I took no notice, and after a little while she began to talk.

'I never heard any singing like yours, Miss Garston; it is a great gift. There is something different in your voice from any one else's: it seems to touch one's heart.'

'If my singing always makes you sad, Miss Hamilton, it is a very dubious gift.'

'Ah, but it is a pleasant sadness,' she replied quickly. 'I feel as though some kind friend were sympathising with me when you sing: it tells me too that, like myself, you have known trouble.'

I sighed as I looked at Charlie's picture. Her eyes followed my glance, and I saw again that tremulous motion of her hands.

'Yes, I know,' she said hurriedly; but her beautiful eyes were full of tears. 'I have always been so sorry for you. You must feel so lonely without him.'

The intense sympathy with which she said these few words seemed to break down my reserve. In a moment I had forgotten that we were strangers, as I told her about my love for Charlie, and the dear old life at the rectory.

It was impossible to doubt the interest with which she listened to me. If I paused for an instant, she begged me very gently to tell her more about myself; she was so sorry for me; but it did her good to hear me.

When I spoke of the life at Hyde Park Gate, and told her how little I was fitted for that sort of existence, she put down her shielding hand, and looked at me with strange wistfulness.

'No, you are too real, too much in earnest, to be satisfied with that sort of life. Mr. Cunliffe used to tell us so. And I seemed to understand it all before I saw you. I always felt as

though I knew you, even before we met. I hope,' hesitating a little, 'that we shall see a great deal of you. I know Giles wishes it.'

'You cannot come here too often, Miss Hamilton. It will always be such a pleasure to me to see you.'

'Oh, I did not mean that,' she returned nervously. 'I may not be able to come here,—that is, not alone; there are reasons, and you must not expect me; but I hope you will come to Gladwyn whenever you have an hour to spare. Giles said so the other day. I think he meant you to be friends with us. You must not mind,' getting still more nervous, 'if Etta is a little odd sometimes. Her moods vary, and she does not always make people feel as though they were welcome; but it is only her manner, so you must not mind it.'

'Oh no; I shall hope to come and see you and Lady Betty some time.'

'And,' she went on hurriedly, 'if there is anything that I can do to help you, I hope you will tell me so. Perhaps I cannot visit the people; but there are other things,—needlework, or a little money. Oh, I have so much spare time, and it will be such a pleasure.'

'Oh yes; you shall help me,' I returned cheerfully, for she was looking so extremely nervous that I wanted to reassure her; but we were prevented from saying any more on this subject, for just then we heard the click of the little gate, and the next moment Uncle Max walked into the room.

CHAPTER XVII

'WHY NOT TRUST ME, MAX?'

MAX looked very discomposed when he saw Miss Hamilton; he shook hands with her gravely, and sat down without saying a word. I wondered if it were my fancy, or if Miss Hamilton had really grown perceptibly paler since his entrance.

'What does this mean, Uncle Max?' I asked gaily, for this sort of oppressive silence did not suit me at all. 'I understood that you and Mr. Tudor were dining at the Glynns' to-night.'

'Lawrence has gone without me,' he replied. 'I had a headache, and so I sent an excuse; but, as it got better, I thought I would come up and see how you were getting on.'

'A headache, Uncle Max!' looking at him rather anxiously, for I had never heard him complain of any ailment before. I had been dissatisfied with his appearance ever since I had come to Heathfield; he had looked worn and thin for some time, but to-night he looked wretched.

'Oh, it is nothing,' he returned quickly. 'Miss Hamilton, I hardly expected to find you here with Ursula. I thought you were all going to the Maberleys'.'

'Etta and Giles have gone,' she replied quietly. 'I ought not to be here, as Lady Betty is alone at Gladwyn; but Miss Garston persuaded me to remain; but it is getting late. I must be going,' rising as she spoke.

'There is not the slightest need for you to hurry,' observed Max; 'it is not so very late, and I will walk up with you to Gladwyn.'

'Indeed, I hope you will do nothing of the kind,' she said hurriedly. 'Miss Garston, will you please tell him that there is no need, no need at all? indeed, I would much rather not.'

Miss Hamilton had lost all her repose of manner; she looked as nervous and shy as any school-girl when Max announced his intention of escorting her; and yet how could any gentleman have allowed her to go down those dark roads alone?

Perhaps Max thought she was unreasonable, for there was a touch of satire in his voice as he answered her:

'I certainly owe it to my conscience to see you safe home. What would Hamilton say if I allowed you to go alone?—Ursula,' turning to me with an odd look, 'it is a fine starlight night; suppose you put on your hat,—a run will do you good,—and relieve Miss Hamilton's mind.'

'Yes, do come,' observed Miss Hamilton, in a relieved voice; but, as she spoke, her lovely eyes seemed appealing to him, and begging him not to be angry with her; but he frowned slightly, and turned aside and took up a book. How was it those two contrived to misunderstand each other so often? Max looked even more hurt than he had done at Gladwyn.

I was not surprised to find that when I left the room Miss Hamilton followed me, but I was hardly prepared to hear her say in a troubled voice,—

'Oh, how unfortunate I am! I would not have had this happen for worlds. Etta will—oh, what am I saying?—I am afraid Mr. Cunliffe is offended with me because I did not wish him to go home with me—but,' a little proudly and resentfully, 'he is too old a friend to misunderstand me, so he need not have said that.'

'I think Uncle Max is not well to-night,' I replied soothingly. 'I never heard him speak in that tone before; he is always so careful not to hurt people's feelings.'

'Yes, I know,' stifling a sigh; 'it is more my fault than his; he is looking wretchedly ill; and—and I think he is a little offended with me about other things; it is impossible to explain, and so he misjudges me.'

'Why do you not try to make things a little clearer?' I asked. 'Could you not say a word to him as we walk home? Uncle Max is so good that I cannot bear him to be vexed about anything, and I know he is disappointed that you will not work in the school.'

'Yes, I know; but you do not understand,' she returned gently. 'I should like to speak to him, if I dared, but I think my courage will fail; it is not so easy as you think.' And then as we went downstairs she took my arm, and I could feel that

her hand was very cold. 'I wish he had not asked you to come: it shows he is hurt with me; but all the same I should have asked you myself.'

Uncle Max took up his felt hat directly he saw us, and followed us silently into the entry; he did not speak as we went down the little garden together; and as we turned into the road leading to the vicarage it was Miss Hamilton who spoke first. She was still holding my arm, perhaps that gave her courage, and she looked across at Max, who was walking on my other side.

'Mr. Cunliffe, I am so sorry you were hurt with me the other night, when Etta spoke about the schools. I am not giving up work for my own pleasure; I loved it far too much; but there are reasons.'

I heard Max give a quick, impatient sigh in the darkness.

'So you always say, Miss Hamilton; you remember we have talked of this before. I have thought it my duty more than once to remonstrate with you about giving up your work, but one seems to talk in the dark; somehow you have never given me any very definite reasons,—headaches,—well, as though I did not know you well enough to be sure you are the last person to think of ailments.'

'Yes, but one's friends are over-careful; but still you are right; it is not only that. Mr. Cunliffe, I wish you would believe that I have good and sufficient reasons for what I do, even if I cannot explain them. It makes one unhappy to be misunderstood by one's clergyman, and,' hesitating a moment, 'and one's friends.'

'Friends are not left so completely in the dark,' was the pointed answer. 'It is no use, Miss Hamilton. I find it impossible to understand you. I have no right to be hurt. No, of course not, no right at all,'—and here Max laughed unsteadily,—'but still, as a clergyman, I thought it could not be wrong to remonstrate when my best worker deserted her post.'

There was no response to this, only Miss Hamilton's hand lay a little heavily on my arm, as though she were tired. I though it best to be silent. No word of mine was needed. I could tell from Max's voice and manner how bitterly he was hurt.

But when he next spoke it was on a different subject.

'I must beg your pardon, Miss Hamilton, for having wronged you in my thoughts about something else. I find your brother has forbidden you to attend evening service for

the present. And no doubt he is right; but your cousin gave me to understand that you stayed away for a very different reason.'

'What did Etta tell you?' she asked quickly. But before he could answer a dark figure seemed to emerge rather suddenly from the road-side. Miss Hamilton dropped my arm at once. 'Is that you, Leah? Have my brother and Miss Darrell returned from Maplehurst?' And I detected an anxious note in her voice.

'Yes, ma'am,' returned Leah civilly; 'and Miss Darrell seemed anxious at your being out so late, because you would take cold, and master begged you would wrap up and walk very fast.'

'Oh, I shall take no harm,' returned Miss Hamilton impatiently. 'Good-night, Miss Garston, and thank you for a very happy evening. Good-night, Mr. Cunliffe, and thank you, too. There is no need to come any farther: Leah will take care of me.' And she waved her hand and moved away in the darkness.

'What a bugbear that woman is!' I observed, rather irritably, as we retraced our steps in the direction of the Man and Plough, the little inn that stood at the junction of the four roads. Everything looked dark and eerie in the faint starlight. Our footsteps seemed to strike sharply against the hard, white road; there was a suspicion of frost in the air. When Max spoke, which was not for some minutes, he merely remarked that we should have a cold Christmas, and then he asked me if I would dine with him at the vicarage on Christmas Day. He and Mr. Tudor would be alone.

'Christmas will be here in less than a fortnight, Ursula,' he went on, rather absently, but I knew he was not thinking of what he was saying. And when we reached the White Cottage he followed me into the parlour, sat down before the fire, and stretched out his hands to the blaze, as though he were very cold.

I stood and watched him for a moment, and then I could bear it no longer.

'Oh, Max!' I exclaimed, 'I wish you would tell me what makes you look so wretchedly ill to-night. Even Miss Hamilton noticed it. I am sure there is something the matter.'

'Nonsense, child! What should be the matter?' But Max turned his face away as he spoke. 'I told you that I had a

headache; but that is nothing to make a fuss about. Mrs. Drabble shall make me a good strong cup of tea when I get home.'

Max's manner was just a trifle testy, but I was not going to be repelled after this fashion. On the contrary, I put my hand on his shoulder and obliged him to look at me.

'It is not only a headache. You are unhappy about something; as though I do not see that. Max, you know we have always been like brother and sister, and I want you to tell me what has grieved you.'

That touched him, as I knew it would, for he had dearly loved his sister.

'I wish your mother were here now,' he returned, in a moved voice. 'I wish poor Emmie were here: there were not many women like her. One could have trusted her with anything.'

'I think I am to be trusted too, Max.'

'Yes, yes, you are like her, Ursula. You have got just the same quiet way. Your voice always reminds me of hers. She was a dear, good sister to me, more like a mother than a sister. I think if she had lived she would have been a great comfort to me now, Ursula.'

'I know I am not so good as my mother, but I should like to be a comfort to you in her place.'

I suppose Max's ear detected the suppressed pain in my voice, for as he looked at me his manner changed; the old affectionate smile came to his lips, and he put his hands lightly on me, as though to keep me near him. 'You have been a comfort to me, my dear. You and I have always understood each other. I think you are as good as gold, Ursula.'

'Then why not trust me, Max? Why not tell me what makes you so unhappy?'

'Little she-bear,' he said, still smiling, 'you must not begin to growl at me after this fashion, because I am somewhat hipped and want a change. There is no need to be anxious about me. A man in my position must have his own and other people's difficulties to bear. No, no, my dear, you have a wise head, but you are too young to take my burdens on your shoulders. What should you know about an old bachelor's worries?'

'An old bachelor,' I returned indignantly, 'when you know you are young and handsome, Max! How can you talk such nonsense?'

I could see he was amused at this.

'You must not expect me to believe that; a man is no judge of his own looks: but I never thought much about such things myself. I detest the notion of a handsome parson. There, we will dismiss the subject of your humble servant. I want to ask you a favour, Ursula.' And then I knew that all my coaxing had been in vain, and that he did not mean to tell me what troubled him and made him look so pinched and worn.

But, in spite of this preface, he kept me waiting for a long time, while he sat silently looking into the fire and stroking his brown beard.

'Ursula,' he began at last, still gazing into the red cavern of coals, as though he saw visions there, 'I want you and Miss Hamilton to be great friends. I am sure that she has taken to you, and she likes few people, and it will be very good for her to be with you.'

Max's speech took me somewhat by surprise. I had not expected him to mention Miss Hamilton's name.

'She is not happy,' he went on, 'and she is more lonely than other girls of her age. Miss Elizabeth is a nice bright little thing, but, as Lawrence says, she wants ballast; she is a child compared to Gladys,—Miss Hamilton, I mean.' And here Max stammered a little nervously.

'No, you are right, she is not happy,' I returned quietly; 'she gives me the impression that she has known some great trouble.'

'Every one has his troubles,' he replied evasively. 'Most people indulge in the luxury of a private skeleton. Now I have often thought that Miss Hamilton and her sister would have been far happier without Miss Darrell; she has rather a peculiar temper, and I have often fancied that she has misrepresented things. It is always difficult to understand women, even the best of them,' with a smothered sigh, 'but I confess Miss Darrell is rather a problem to me.'

'I am not surprised to hear you say that,' I returned quickly: 'you are just the sort of man, Max, to be hoodwinked by any designing person. I am less charitable than you, and women are sharper in these matters. I have already found out that Miss Darrell makes Miss Hamilton miserable.'

'Gently, gently, Ursula,' in quite a shocked voice; 'there is no need to put things quite so strongly: you are rather hasty, my dear. Miss Darrell may be a little too managing, and

perhaps jealous and exacting; but I think she is very fond of her cousins.'

'Indeed!' rather drily, for I did not agree with Max in the least; he was always ready to believe the best of every one.

'Hamilton, too, is really devoted to his sisters, but they do not understand him. I believe Miss Hamilton is very proud of her brother, but she does not confide in him. He has often told me, in quite a pained way, how reserved they are with him. I believe Miss Darrell is far more his *confidante* than his sisters.'

'No doubt,' I returned, quite convinced in my own mind that this was the case.

'So you must see yourself how much Miss Hamilton needs a friend,' he went on hurriedly. 'I want you to be very good to her, Ursula; perhaps you may think it a little strange if I say that I think it will be as much your duty to befriend Miss Hamilton as to minister to Phœbe Locke.'

'I wonder who is speaking strongly now, Max.'

'But if it be the truth,' he pleaded, a little anxiously.

'You need not fear,' was my answer: 'if Miss Hamilton requires my friendship, I am very willing to bestow it. I will be as good to her as I know how to be, Max. Is it likely I should refuse the first favour you have ever asked me?' And, as he thanked me rather gravely, I felt that he was very much in earnest about this. He went away after this, but I think I had succeeded in cheering him, for he looked more like himself as he bade me good-night; but after he had gone I sat for a long time, reflecting over our talk.

I felt perplexed and a little saddened by what had passed. Max had not denied that he was unhappy, but he had refused to confide in me. Was his unhappiness connected in any way with Miss Hamilton? This question baffled me; it was impossible for me to answer it.

I could not understand his manner to her. He was perfectly kind and gentle to her, as he was to all women, but he was also reserved and distant; in spite of their long acquaintance, for he had visited at Gladwyn for years, there was no familiarity between them. Miss Hamilton, on her part, seemed to avoid him, and yet I was sure she both respected and liked him. There was some strange barrier between them that hindered all free communication. Max was certainly not like himself when Miss Hamilton was present; and on her side she seemed to freeze and become unapproachable the moment he appeared.

But this was not the only thing that perplexed me. The whole atmosphere of Gladwyn was oppressive. I had a subtile feeling of discomfort whenever Miss Darrell was in the room; her voice seemed to have a curious magnetic effect on one; its tuneless vibrations seemed to irritate me; if she spoke loudly, her voice was rather shrill and unpleasant. She knew this, and carefully modulated it. I used to wonder over its smoothness and fluency.

And there was another thing that struck me. Mr. Hamilton seemed fond of his step-sisters, but he treated them with reserve; the frank jokes that pass between brothers and sisters, the pleasant raillery, the blunt speeches, the interchange of confidential looks, were missing in the family circle at Gladwyn. Mr. Hamilton behaved with old-fashioned courtesy to his sisters; he was watchful over their comfort, but he was certainly a little stiff and constrained in his manner to them: he seemed to unbend more freely to his cousin than to them; he had scolded her good-humouredly once or twice, after quite a brotherly fashion, and she had taken his rebukes in a way that showed they understood each other. I grew tired at last of trying to adjust my ideas on the subject of the Hamilton family. I was rather provoked to find how they had begun to absorb my interest. 'Never mind, I have promised Uncle Max to be good to her,' was my last waking thought that night, 'and I am determined to keep my word.' And I fell asleep, and dreamt that I was trying to save Miss Hamilton from drowning, and that all the time Miss Darrell was standing on the shore, laughing and pelting us with stones, and when a larger one than usual struck me, I awoke.

I wondered if it were accident or design that brought Miss Darrell across my path the next day. I had just left the Lockes' cottage, feeling somewhat tired and depressed: Phœbe had been in one of her contrary moods, and had given me a good deal of trouble, but the evil spirit had been quieted at last, and I had taken my leave after reprimanding her severely for her rudeness. I was just closing the garden gate, when Miss Darrell came up to me in the dusk, holding out her hand with her tingling little laugh.

'How odd that we should have met just here! I hardly knew you, Miss Garston, in that long cloak, you looked so like a Sister of Charity. I think you are very wise to adopt a uniform.'

'Thank you, but I have hardly adopted one,' I returned, folding the fur edges of my cloak closer to me, for it was a bitterly cold evening. 'Are you going home, Miss Darrell? because you have passed the turning that leads to Gladwyn.'

'Oh, I do not mind a longer round,' was the careless answer. 'I am very hardy, and a walk never hurts me. If it were Gladys, now——by the bye, have you seen my cousin Giles to-day?'

'No,' I returned, wondering a little at her question.

'You are lucky to have escaped him,' with another laugh. 'Dear, dear, how angry Giles was last night, to be sure, when we came home and found Gladys out! he was far too angry to say much to her; he only asked her if she had taken leave of her senses, and that some people—I do not know whom he meant—ought to be ashamed of themselves.'

'Indeed!' somewhat sarcastically, for I confess this speech made me feel rather cross. I wondered if Mr. Hamilton could really have said it. I determined that I would ask him on the first opportunity.

'It was a very injudicious proceeding,' went on Miss Darrell smoothly. 'Gladys was to blame, of course; but still, if you remember, I told you how delicate she was, and how we dreaded night air for her: young people are so careless of their health, but of course, as Giles said, we thought she would be safe with you. You see, Giles looks upon you in the character of nurse, Miss Garston, and forgets you are young too. "Depend upon it, they have forgotten the time," I said to him: "when two girls are chattering their secrets to each other, they are not likely to remember anything so sublunary." You should have seen Giles's expression of lordly disgust when I said that.'

'I should rather have heard Mr. Hamilton's answer.'

'Don't be too sure of that,' returned Miss Darrell, in a mocking voice that somehow recalled my dream. 'I am afraid it would not please you. Giles is no flatterer. He said he thought you would have been far too sensible for that sort of nonsense, but that one never knew, and that it was not only young and pretty girls like Gladys who could be romantic, and for all your staid looks you were not Methuselah: rather a dubious speech, Miss Garston.'

'True!' far too dubious to be entirely palatable to my feminine pride; but I was careful not to hint this to Miss Darrell, and she went on in the same light jesting way.

'It is terribly hard to satisfy Giles, he is so critical; he sets impossible standards for people, and then sneers if they do not reach them. He had conceived rather a high opinion of you, Miss Garston. He told me one day that he would be glad for you to be intimate with his sisters, as they would only learn good from you, and that he hoped that I would encourage your visits. I trust that he has not changed his opinion since then; but Giles is so odd when people disappoint him. I said last night that we would invite you for to-morrow, and then you and Gladys could finish your talk; but he was as cross as possible, and begged that I would invite no one for Thursday, as he was very busy, and Gladys must find another opportunity for her talk. There, how I am chattering on!—and perhaps I ought not to have said all that; but I thought you would wonder at our want of neighbourliness, and of course we cannot expect you to understand Giles's odd temper: it is a great pity he has got this idea in his head.'

'What idea, Miss Darrell?'

'Dear, dear, how sharp you are! how you take me up! Of course it is only Giles's ill temper: he cannot really think you wanting in ballast.'

'Oh, I understand now. Please go on.'

'But I have no more to say,' rather bewildered by my abruptness. 'Of course we shall see you soon, when all this has blown over. If you like, I will tell Giles I have seen you.'

'Please tell Mr. Hamilton nothing. I will speak to him myself. Good-night, Miss Darrell; I am rather cold and tired after my day's work. I do not in the least expect that Miss Hamilton has taken any harm.' And I made my escape. I do not know what Miss Darrell thought of me, but she walked on rather thoughtfully; as for me, I felt tingling all over with irritation. If Mr. Hamilton had dared to imply these things of me, I should hardly be able to keep my promise to Uncle Max, for I would certainly decline to visit at Gladwyn.

CHAPTER XVIII

MISS HAMILTON'S LITTLE SCHOLAR

MISS DARRELL'S innuendoes were not to be borne with any degree of patience. Mr. Hamilton's opinion might be nothing to me,—how often I repeated that!—but all the same I owed it to my dignity to seek an explanation with him.

The opportunity came the very next day.

He called to speak to me about a new patient, a little cripple boy who had broken his arm; the father was a labourer, and there were ten children, and the mother took in washing. 'Poor Robin has not much chance of good nursing,' he went on; 'Mrs. Bell is not a bad mother, as mothers go, but she is overworked and overburdened; she has a good bit of difficulty in keeping her husband out of the alehouse. Good heavens! what lives these women lead! it is to be hoped that it will be made up to them in another world: no washing-tubs and alehouses there, no bruised bodies and souls, eh, Miss Garston?'

Mr. Hamilton was talking in his usual fashion; he had taken the arm-chair I had offered him, and seemed in no hurry to leave it, although his dinner-hour was approaching. When he had given me full directions about Robin, and I had promised to go to him directly after my breakfast the next morning, I said to him in quite a careless manner that I hoped Miss Hamilton was well and had sustained no ill effects from her visit to me.

'Oh no: she is better than usual. I think you roused her and did her good. Gladys mopes too much at home. All the same,' in a tolerant tone, 'you ought not to have kept her so late; as Etta very wisely remarked, it was no good for her to stay in on Sundays and remain out a couple of hours later another night; you see, Gladys takes cold so easily.'

'I hear you were very much inclined to blame the village nurse, Mr. Hamilton.'

'Who?—I?' looking at me in a little surprise. 'I do not remember that I said anything very dreadful. Etta was in a fuss, as usual; you managing women like to make a fuss sometimes: she sent off Leah, and wanted me to lecture Gladys for her imprudence; but I was not inclined to be bothered, and said it was Gladys's affair if she chose to make herself ill, but all the same she ought to be ashamed of such skittishness at her age. I don't believe Gladys knew I was joking; that is the worst of her, she never sees a joke; Etta does, though, for she burst out laughing when my lady walked off to bed in rather a dignified manner. I hope you are not easily offended too, Miss Garston?'

'Oh dear, no,' I returned coolly, 'only I should be sorry if you had in any way changed your opinion of my steadiness. Miss Darrell hinted that you were vexed with me for keeping your sister, and thought that I was to blame.'

Mr. Hamilton looked so bewildered at this that I exonerated him from that moment.

'What nonsense has that girl been talking?' he said, rather irritated. 'I always tell her that tongue of hers will lead her into trouble; I know she talked plenty of rubbish that night. When she said it was a pity that you and Gladys were always chattering secrets, I told her that though you were not a Methuselah, you were hardly the sort of person to indulge in that sort of sentimentality, that I could answer for your good sense in that, and that Etta need not be so hard on a pretty young girl like Gladys. That was not accusing you of want of steadiness.'

'No, thank you. I am so glad that I know what you really said.'

'Indeed, I was not aware that my good or bad opinion mattered to Miss Garston: you have certainly never given me the impression that you mind very much what I say or think.'

Was Mr. Hamilton cross? He looked quite moody all at once; his face wore that hard disagreeable look that I so disliked. He had been so pleasant in his manners ever since that evening at Gladwyn that I was rather sorry that this agreeable state of things should be disturbed. He was evidently not to blame for Miss Darrell's misrepresentations, so I hastened with much policy to throw oil on the troubled waters.

'I do not know why you should say that. It ought not to be a matter of indifference what people think of us.'

'Ought it not? Would you like to know my opinion of you after nearly a month of acquaintance? Let me warn you, I have entirely changed my opinion since our stormy interview in Cunliffe's study.'

I do not know what there was in Mr. Hamilton's look and manner that made me say hastily,—

'Oh no, I would rather not know, and I hope you will not tell me. I am quite sure you do not misconstrue my motives now.'

'You may be quite sure of that,' rather grimly, as though my last speech displeased him. 'It is difficult not to think you older than you are, you are so terribly sensible and matter-of-fact. How can Gladys get on with you, I wonder? Do you put a moral extinguisher on all her romance?'

'I am not quite so matter-of-fact as you make out, Mr. Hamilton.'

He shot an odd sort of glance at me. 'When you sing, one can believe that; there is nothing prosaic in a nestful of larks. Poor Phœbe, I do believe you are doing her good: she looks far more human already. By the bye, when are you coming to sing to us again? I told Etta that I was engaged on Thursday, and she declared it was our only free day until Christmas.'

'I shall be too busy to come till after then,' I replied quietly, for I did not wish him to think that I was ready to jump at any invitation to Gladwyn. He seemed rather disconcerted at my coldness.

'Why, it is more than ten days to Christmas! I hope you do not mean to be stiff and unneighbourly, Miss Garston. I am afraid,' with a decidedly quizzical look, 'that pride is a serious defect of yours.'

'Perhaps so; but, you see, I do not wish to be different from my neighbours,' I replied quietly; but my speech was received by Mr. Hamilton with a hearty laugh.

'Oh yes, you are right: we are a proud lot,' he observed, as he rose to take leave. 'Well, Miss Garston, after Christmas is over, we shall hope to see you for an evening; but any afternoon you are free they will be glad to see you. Etta makes excellent tea. What a craze five-o'clock tea is with you women! I have protested against it in vain: the girls are in majority against me.' With this speech he took himself off. I was much relieved at this peaceable ending to our interview. Now

he was gone I could scarcely believe that I had ventured on a joke with the formidable Mr. Hamilton, a joke which he had taken in excellent part. I began to feel less in awe of him: he certainly knew how to shake hands heartily, and I could recapitulate Lady Betty's criticism on myself and apply it to him, for when Mr. Hamilton smiled he looked quite a different man,—years younger, and much better looking. Well, I was glad that he had such a good opinion of my common sense.

My hands were likely to be full of business until after Christmas. Mrs. Marshall was growing gradually weaker, and Mr. Hamilton was doubtful whether she would last to see the New Year in. Her husband would be home on Christmas Eve; his work at Lewes would be finished by then, and he hoped to find work nearer home. Poor Mary told me this with tears in her eyes; her one prayer was that she might be spared to see Andrew again. 'He has been a good husband to me, and has kept out of the public-house for the sake of his wife and the children, and I cannot die easy until I have said good-bye to him,' finished the poor woman; but when I repeated this to Mr. Hamilton he shook his head. 'A few hours may take her off any day,' he said; 'it is only a wonder that she has lasted so long. I believe she is keeping herself alive by the sheer force of her longing to see her husband. Women are strange creatures, Miss Garston.'

My new patient was likely to give me plenty of occupation. I found the poor little fellow, looking very forlorn and dull, lying in a dark corner of a large chilly garret, which was evidently shared by two or three brothers.

Mrs. Bell, who had left her washing-tub to accompany me upstairs, stood drying her arms on her apron, and talking in a high-pitched querulous voice. 'No one can say I have not been unfortunate this year,' she grumbled. 'There's Bell, he gets worse and worse. I fetched him myself out of the Man and Plough last Saturday night, where he was drinking the money that was to buy the children bread. "Do you call yourself a man or a brute?" I says, but in my opinions it's wronging the poor bruteses to compare them with such as him. "Work!" says he; "why don't you work yourself?" when I am at that washtub from morning till night.'

'And now poor Robin is adding to your trouble, Mrs. Bell,' I observed, with a pitying look at the child's white face and large wistful eyes.

'Ay, he has gone and done it now,' she returned, with a touch of motherly feeling; 'it was a slide those bad boys had made, and Robbie came down on it with his crutch under him. He is always in trouble, is Robbie, has had more illnesses than all the children put together; there is nothing Robin can't take: whooping-cough,—why, he nearly whooped himself to death; measles and scarlet fever,—why, he was as nearly gone as possible, the doctor said. He has always been puny and weakly from a baby. But there's Bell, now, makes more of a fuss over Rob than over the others; if there is anything that will keep him away from the Man and Plough, it is Rob asking him to take him out somewhere.'

'Ay, father's promised to sit with me this evening,' observed Robin, in a faint little treble.

'Then we must make the room comfortable for father,' I said quickly. 'Mrs. Bell, I must not hinder you any more; but if you could spare one of the girls to help me tidy up a little.'

'Ay, Sally can come,' she returned; 'the place does look like a piggery. You see, Tom and Ned and Willie sleep here along of Robin, and boys know naught about keeping a place tidy; Sally reds it up towards evening. But there, doctor said Robbie must have a fire, and I've clean forgotten it: I will send up Sally with some sticks and a lump or two of coal.'

Mrs. Bell was not a bad sort of woman, certainly, but, like many of her class, she was not a good manager; and when a woman has ten children, and a husband rather too fond of the Man and Plough, and is obliged to stand at her washing-tub for hours every day, one cannot expect to find the house in perfect order.

We had soon a bright little fire burning, which gave quite a cheery aspect to the large bare attic; the sloping roof and small window did not seem to matter so much. With Sally's help I moved Robin's little bed to a lighter part of the room, where the roof did not slope so much, and where the wintry sunlight could reach him. Robin seemed much pleased with this change of position, and when I had washed and made him comfortable he declared that he felt 'first-rate.'

I had so much to do for my patient that I was obliged to let Sally tidy up the room in her usual scrambling way. The child had been sadly neglected by that time, and he was getting faint. I had to prepare some arrow-root for his dinner, and then hurry off to the Marshalls' before I had my own. I was obliged to omit my visit to Phœbe that day, and divide my time between

Mrs. Marshall and Robin. When I had given Robin his tea, and had put a chair by the fire for father, I went off, feeling that I could leave him more comfortably. The eldest boy, Tom, a big, strapping lad of fourteen, who went to work, had promised to keep the other boys quiet, 'that the little chap might not be disturbed,' and as Robin again declared that he felt first-rate, if it weren't for his arm, I hoped that he might be able to sleep.

'Father stopped with me ever so long, until the boys came to bed,' were Robin's first words the next morning; 'and doctor came, and said we looked quite snug, and he is going to send father some books to read, and some papers, and father said he was more comfortable than downstairs, as I did not mind his pipe, and Tom has hung my linnet there,' pointing to the window, 'and if you open the cage, miss, you will see him hop all over the bedclothes, and chirp in the beautifullest way.'

We had a great deal of cleaning to do that day. I shall never forget Lady Betty's face when she came upstairs and saw me down on my knees at work in my corner of the room; for Sally was little, and the room was large, and I was obliged to go to her assistance.

'Good gracious, Miss Garston!' she said, in quite a shocked voice, 'you do not mean to tell me that you consider it your duty to scrub floors?'

'Well, no,' I returned, laughing, for really her consternation was ludicrous. 'I should consider it a waste of strength, generally; but we never know what comes in a day's work. Sally is so little that I am obliged to help her.'

'Why can't Mrs. Bell do it?' asked Lady Betty indignantly.

'Mrs. Bell has hardly time to cook the children's dinner. Please don't look so shocked. I don't often scrub floors, and I have nearly finished now. What have you brought in that basket, little Red Riding-Hood?' for in her little crimson hood-like bonnet she did not look so unlike Red Riding-Hood.

'Oh, Giles asked Gladys to send some things for poor little Robin, and she packed them herself. There is a jar of beef-tea, and some jelly, and some new-laid eggs, and sponge-cakes, and a roll or two; and Gladys hopes you will let her know what Robin wants, for he used to be her little scholar, and she is so interested in him.'

Of course I knew Lady Betty would chatter about me when she returned home, but I was rather vexed when Mr. Hamilton

took me to task the next morning and gave me quite a lecture on the subject; he made me promise at last that I would never do anything of the kind again. I hardly know what made me so submissive. I think it was his threat of keeping any more patients from me, and then he seemed so thoroughly put out.

'It is such folly wearing yourself out like this, Miss Garston,' he said angrily. 'I wonder why women never will learn common sense. If you work under me I will thank you to obey my directions, and I do not choose my nurse to waste her time and strength in scrubbing floors. Yes, Robin boy, I am very angry with nurse; but there is no occasion for you to cry about it; and—why, good heavens! if you are not crying too, Miss Garston! Of course; there, I told you so; you have just knocked yourself up.'

His tone so aggravated me that I plucked up a little spirit.

'I am not a bit knocked up,'—and, in rather a choky voice, 'I am not crying; I never cry before people; only I am a little tired. I was up all last night with Mrs. Marshall, and you talk so much.'

'Oh, very well,' rather huffily; but he was in a bad humour that day. 'I won't talk any more to you. But I should like to know one thing: when are you going home?'

'In another hour; my head aches, rather, and I think I shall lie down.'

'Of course your head aches; but there, you have given me a promise, so I will not say any more. Try what a good nap will do. I am going round by the Lockes', and I shall tell Phœbe not to expect you this afternoon. It won't hurt her to miss you sometimes; it will teach her to value her blessings more, and people cannot sing when they have a headache.' And he walked off without waiting for me to thank him for his thoughtfulness. What did he mean by saying that I was crying, the ridiculous man, just because there were tears in my eyes? I certainly could not fancy myself crying because Mr. Hamilton scolded me!

I had a refreshing nap, and kept my dinner waiting, but I must own I was a little touched when Mrs. Barton produced a bottle of champagne which she said Mr. Hamilton had brought in his pocket and had desired that I was to have some directly I woke. 'And I was to tell you, with his compliments, that his sister Gladys would sit with Robin all the afternoon, and that Lady Betty was at the Marshalls', and he was going again

himself, and Phœbe Locke was better, and he hoped you would not stir out again to-day.'

How very kind and thoughtful of Mr. Hamilton! He had sent his sisters to look after my patients, that I might be able to enjoy my rest with a quiet conscience. I was sorry that he should think that I was so easily knocked up; but it was not over-fatigue, nor yet his scolding, that had brought the tears to my eyes. To-day was the second anniversary of Charlie's death, and through that long, wakeful night, as I sat beside poor Mary's bed, I was recalling the bitter hours when my darling went down deeper into the place of shadows,—when he fought away his young life, while Lesbia and I wept and prayed beside him. No wonder a word unnerved me; but I could not tell Mr. Hamilton this.

When we met the next day he asked me, rather curtly, if the headache had gone; but when I thanked him, somewhat shyly, for the medicine he had sent, he got rather red, and interrupted me with unusual abruptness.

'You have nothing for which to thank me,' he said, in quite a repellent tone. 'I am glad you obeyed orders and stopped at home; I was afraid you might be contumacious, as usual,'—which was rather ungracious of him, after the promise he had extracted from me.

I questioned Robin about Miss Hamilton's visit; she had remained with the boy some hours, reading to him and amusing him, and, in Robin's favourite language, 'getting on first-rate; only, just as I was drinking my mugful of tea, parson comes, and Miss Hamilton she says she will be late, and gets up in a hurry, and——'

'Wait a minute, Robin: do you mean Mr. Cunliffe or Mr. Tudor?'

'Oh, the vicar, to be sure; and he seemed finely surprised to see Miss Hamilton there. "So you've come to see your old scholar," he says, smiling, and Miss Hamilton says, "Yes; but she must go now," and she drops her glove, and parson looks for it, but it was too dark, and for all his groping it could not be found. "I must just go without it," says Miss Hamilton; "but I have got my muff, and it does not matter," and she says good-bye, and goes away. Parson found it, though,' went on Robin garrulously. 'When Sally lighted the candle he spies it at once, and puts it in his pocket. "Miss Hamilton will be fine and glad when you tell her it is found," I says to parson.

but he just looks at me in an odd sort of way, and says, "Yes, Robin, certainly."—"And you won't forget to give it to her, to-morrow, sir?' but he did not seem to hear me. "Good-night, my man," he said. "So Miss Hamilton did not think you were too old to be kissed." And he kissed me just in the same place as she did. What did you say, miss?'

'I did not say anything, Robin.'

'Didn't you, miss? I thought I heard you say "poor man," or something like that. Is not Miss Hamilton beautiful? I think she is almost as beautiful as my picture of the Virgin Mary. I asked parson if he did not think so, and he said yes. Do you think she will come again soon?'

'We shall see, Robbie dear.' But, as I spoke, something told me that we should not see Miss Hamilton there again.

CHAPTER XIX

THE PICTURE IN GLADYS'S ROOM

THE days flew rapidly by, and I was almost too busy to heed them as they passed. Each morning I woke with fresh energy to my day's work; the hours were so full of interest and varied employment that my evening rest came all too soon. I grew so fond of my patients, especially of poor little Robin, that I never left them willingly; and the knowledge that I was necessary to them, that they looked to me for relief and comfort, seemed to fill my life with sweetness.

As I said to myself daily, no one need complain that one's existence is objectless, or altogether desolate, as long as there are sick bodies and sick souls to which one can minister. For 'Give, and it shall be given unto you,' is the Divine command, and sympathy and help bestowed on our suffering fellow-creatures shall be repaid into our bosoms a hundredfold. I was right in my surmise: Miss Hamilton did not again visit her little scholar; but Lady Betty came almost daily, and was a great help in amusing the child. I was with him for an hour in the morning, and again in the late afternoon; but Mrs. Marshall took up the greater part of my time; she was growing more feeble every day, and needed my constant care. Unless it were absolutely necessary, I was unwilling to sacrifice my night's rest, or to draw too largely on my stock of strength; but I had fallen into the habit, during the last week or two, of going down to the cottage in the evening about eight or nine, and settling her comfortably for the night. I found these late visits were a great boon to her, and seemed to break the length of the long winter night, and so I did not regret my added trouble. Poor

Phœbe had to be content with an hour snatched from the busier portion of the day; but she was beginning to occupy herself now. I kept her constantly supplied with books; and Miss Locke assured me that she read them with avidity; her poor famished mind, deprived for so many years of its natural aliment, fastened almost greedily on the nourishment provided for it. From the moment I induced her to open a book her appetite for reading returned, and she occupied herself in this manner for hours.

She never spoke to her sister about what she read, but when Kitty and she were alone she would keep the child entranced for an hour together by the stories she told her out of Miss Garston's books.

'Sometimes Kitty sings to her, and sometimes they have a rare talk,' Miss Locke would say. 'I am often too busy to do more than look in for five minutes or so, to see how they are getting on. Phœbe grumbles far less; it is wonderful to hear her say, sometimes, that she did not know it was bedtime, when I go in to fetch the lamp. Reading? ay, she is always reading; but she sleeps a deal, too.'

I used to look round Phœbe's room with satisfaction now; it had quite lost its stiff, angular look. A dark crimson foot-quilt lay on the bed, a stand of green growing ferns was on the table, and two or three books were always placed beside her.

Some gay china figures that I had hunted out of the glass cupboard in the parlour enlivened the mantelpiece, and a simple landscape, with sheep feeding in a sunny field, hung opposite the bed. Some pretty cretonne curtains had replaced the dingy dark ones. Phœbe herself had a soft fleecy gray shawl drawn over her thin shoulders. Mr. Hamilton again and again commented on her improved appearance, but I always listened rather silently; the evil spirit that had taken possession of Phœbe had not finally left her; 'and why could not we cast it out?' used to come to my lips sometimes as I looked at her; but all the same I knew the Master-hand was needed for that.

Christmas Day fell this year on a Tuesday. On Sunday afternoon I had finished my rounds and was returning home to tea, when, as I was passing the Marshalls' cottage, Peggy ran after me bareheaded to say her father had just arrived, and would I come in for a moment, as mother seemed a little faint, and granny was frightened.

I hastened back with the child; for, of course, in poor Mary's state the least shock might prove fatal. I found Marshall stooping over the bed and supporting his wife with clumsy fondness, with the tears rolling down his weather-beaten face.

'I'm 'most 'feard she's gone, missis,' he said hoarsely. 'Poor lass, I took her too sudden, and she had not the strength of the little un there.'

I bade him lay her down gently, and then applied the necessary remedies, and, to my great relief, my patient presently revived. It was touching to see the weak hand trying to feel for her husband; as it came into contact with the rough coat-sleeve, a smile came upon the death-like face.

'It is Andrew himself,' she whispered; 'I feared it was naught but a dream, mother; it is Andrew's own self, and he is looking well and hearty. Ay, lad,' with a loving look at him, 'I could not have died in peace till I had seen you again; and now God's will be done, for He has been good to me and granted me my heart's desire.'

Poor Marshall looked weary and travel-stained, so I beckoned Peggy out of the room, and with her help there was soon a comfortable meal on the table,—part of the meat-pie that was left from the children's dinner, a round or two of hot toast, and a cup of smoking coffee.

The poor man looked a little bewildered when he saw these preparations for his comfort, and he wiped his eyes again with his rough coat-sleeve.

'I have been so long without wife or child that I can't make it out to see them all flocking round me again. There is Tim a man almost. Well, I have been tramping it since five this morning, and I am nearly ready to drop; so thank you kindly, missis, and with your leave I will fall to.'

When I returned to Mary I found her looking wonderfully revived and cheerful.

'Isn't it grand to think that the Lord has let me have my own way about seeing Andrew?' she said, with a smile: 'he will be here now, poor lad, to see the last of me and look after the children. Now, you must not let me keep you, Miss Garston, for Andrew is that handy he can nurse as well as mother there before she lost her eyesight. I have been a deal of trouble to you, and now you must go home and rest.'

I was glad to be set at liberty, for I hoped that I might be in time to attend evening service; but just as I had finished tea,

and was trying to think that I was not so very tired, and that it would not be wiser to stay at home, the outer door unlatched, and the next moment there was a quick tap at the parlour door, and Lady Betty bustled in, looking very rosy from the cold.

'Oh, I can't stop a moment,' she said breathlessly; 'I have given Etta the slip, and in five minutes she will be looking for me; but I took it in my head to ask you to go and see Gladys. She is in her room with a cold, and looks dreadfully dull, and I know it will do her so much good if you will go and talk to her. Giles is out, and every one else, so no one will disturb you: so do go, there's a good soul.' And actually before I could answer, the impetuous little creature had shut the door in my face, and I could hear her running down the garden path.

I had not seen Miss Hamilton since the evening Uncle Max discovered us together, and I could not resist the temptation of finding her alone. Lady Betty had said she was in her room, and looked dreadfully dull. I had promised Max to be good to her, so of course it was my duty to go and cheer her up. I made this so plain to my conscience that in five minutes more I was on the road to Gladwyn, and before the church bells had stopped ringing I had entered the dark shrubberies, and was looking at the closed windows, wondering which of them belonged to Miss Hamilton's room.

I was agreeably surprised when a pretty-looking maid admitted me. I had taken a strange dislike to Leah, and the man who had waited upon us at dinner that evening had a dark, unprepossessing face; but this girl looked bright and cheerful, and took my message to Miss Hamilton at once without a moment's hesitation. She returned almost immediately. Miss Hamilton was in her room, but she would be very glad to see me, and the girl looked glad too as she led the way to the turret-room. Miss Hamilton was standing on the threshold, and met me with outstretched hands; she looked ill and worn, and had a soft white shawl drawn closely round her as though she were chilly, but her eyes brightened at the sight of me.

'This is good of you, Miss Garston; I never expected such a pleasure. That will do, Chatty; you can close the door.' And, still holding my hand, she drew me into the room. It was a pretty room, but furnished far more simply than Miss Darrell's. The deep bay-window formed a recess large enough

to hold the dressing-table and a chair or two, and was half-hidden by the blue cretonne curtains; besides this there were two more windows. Miss Hamilton had been sitting in a low cushioned chair by the fire; a small table with a lamp and some books was beside her; a Persian kitten lay on the white rug. On a stand beside a chair was a large, beautifully-painted photograph in a carved frame; the folding doors were open, and a vase of flowers stood before it.

'What has put this benevolent idea into your head?' she asked, as she drew forward a comfortable wicker chair with a soft padded seat. 'I thought I had a long, dull evening before me, with no resource but my own thoughts, for I was tired of reading. I could scarcely believe Chatty when she said that you were in the drawing-room.'

I told Miss Hamilton of Lady Betty's visit, and she laughed quite merrily.

'Good little Betty! She is always trying to give me pleasure. She wanted to stay with me herself, only Etta said it was no use for two people to stop away from church. They have all gone, even Thornton and Leah. I believe only Parker and Chatty are in the house.'

'Is Chatty the housemaid?'

'No, the under-housemaid; but Catherine's father is ill, so she has gone to nurse him——'

'And Leah—who is Leah? I mean what is her capacity in the household?' as Miss Hamilton looked rather surprised at my question.

'She used to be Aunt Margaret's attendant, and now she is Etta's maid,—at least, we call her so,—but she makes herself useful in many ways. She is rather a superior person, and well educated, but I like Chatty to wait on me best; she is such a simple, honest little soul. I know people say servants have not much feeling, but I am sure Chatty would do anything for me and Lady Betty.'

'And you think Leah would not?' I asked, rather stupidly.

'I did not say so, did I?' she answered quickly. 'We always look upon Leah as Etta's servant. She was devoted to her old mistress, and of course that makes Etta care for her so much. To me she is not a pleasant person. Etta has spoiled her, and she gives herself airs, and takes too much upon herself. Do you know'—with an amused smile—'Lady Betty and I think that Etta is rather afraid of her? She never ventures

to find fault with her, and once or twice Lady Betty has heard Leah scolding Etta when something has put her out. I should not care to be scolded by my maid: should you, Miss Garston?'

'No,' I returned, rather absently, for, unperceived by Miss Hamilton, my attention was arrested by the photograph. It was the portrait of a young man, and something in the face seemed familiar to me.

The next moment I was caught. A distressed look crossed Miss Hamilton's face, and she made a sudden movement, as though she would close the photograph; but on second thoughts she handed it to me.

'Should you like to see it more closely? It is a photograph of my twin-brother, Eric. They think—yes, they are afraid that he is dead.'

Her lips had turned quite white as she spoke, and in my surprise, for I never knew there had been another brother, I did not answer, but only bent over the picture.

It was the face of a young man about nineteen or twenty, —a beautiful face, that strangely resembled his sister's; the large blue-gray eyes were like hers, but the fair budding moustache scarcely hid the weak, irresolute mouth. Here the resemblance stopped, for Miss Hamilton's firm lips and finely-curved chin showed no lack of power; but in her brother's face —attractive as it was—there were clearly signs of vacillation.

'Well, what do you think of it?' she asked, with a quick catch of her breath.

'It is a beautiful face,' I returned, rather hesitating. 'Very striking, too. One could not easily forget it; and it is strangely like you: but——'

'Yes, I know,'—taking it out of my hand and closing the carved panels,—'but you think it weak. Oh yes, we cannot all be strong alike. Our Creator has ordained that, and it is for us to be merciful. Poor Eric! He would be three-and-twenty now. He was just twenty when that was taken.'

'And he is dead?'

'They say so. They think he is drowned; but we have no real proof, and we cannot be sure of it. He is alive in my dreams. That is the best of not really knowing,' she went on, in a sad voice: 'one can go on praying for him, for, perhaps, after all, he may one day come back; not from the dead,—oh no, I do not believe that for a moment; but if he be alive——' her eyes dilating and her manner full of excitement

I pressed her to tell me about him, adding softly that I could feel for her more than any one else, as I had lost my own twin-brother. But she looked kindly at me and shook her head.

'Not to-night. I do not feel well enough, and it always makes me so ill and excited to speak about it, and we should not have time. Perhaps some day, when I get more used to you. Oh yes, some day, perhaps.'

'Indeed, I do not wish to intrude upon your trouble, Miss Hamilton,' I returned, colouring at this repulse. But she took my hand and pressed it gently.

'You must not be hurt with me. I have never spoken to any one about Eric. Mr. Cunliffe knows. But he—he—is different, and he was very kind to me. I must always be grateful.' The tears came into her eyes, and she hurried on:

'I should like you to know, only I am such a coward. I am so sure of your sympathy, you seem already such a friend. Why do you call me Miss Hamilton? I am younger than you. I should like to hear you say Gladys. Miss Hamilton seems so stiff from you, and for years I have thought of you as Ursula.'

'You mean that Uncle Max has often talked of me?'

'Oh yes,' with an involuntary sigh, 'of you and your brother. He was always so fond of you both. He used to say very often that he wished that I knew you; that you were so good, so unlike other people; that you bore your trouble so beautifully.'

'I bore my trouble well! Oh, Miss Hamilton, it is impossible that he could have said that, when he knew how rebellious I was.' But here I could say no more.

'Don't cry, Ursula,' she said, very sweetly; 'you are not rebellious now. Oh, I used to be so sorry for you; you little thought at that dreadful time, when you were so lonely and desolate, that a girl whom you had never seen, and perhaps of whom you had never heard, was praying for you with all her heart. That is what I mean by saying that I have known you for a long time.'

By mutual impulse we bent forward and kissed each other, —a quiet lingering kiss that spoke of full understanding and sympathy. I had promised Uncle Max to be good to this girl, to do all I could to help her, but I did not know as I gave that promise how my heart would cleave to her, and that in time I should grow to love her with that rare friend-

ship that is described in Holy Writ as 'passing the love of women.' We were silent for a little while, and then by some sudden impulse I began to speak of Max; I told her that I felt a little anxious about him, that he did not seem quite well or quite happy.

'I have thought so myself,' she returned, very quietly.

'Max is so good that I cannot bear to see him unhappy,—he is so unselfish, so full of thought for other people, so earnest in his work, so conscientious and self-denying.'

'True,' she replied, taking up a little toy screen that lay in her lap and shielding her face from the flame: 'he is all that. If any one deserves to be happy, it is your uncle.'

I was glad to hear her say this, but her voice was a little constrained.

'He seems very far from happy just now,' was my answer: 'he looks worn and thin, as though he were overworking himself. I asked him the other night what ailed him. Are you cold, Miss Hamilton? I thought you shivered just now.'

'No, no,' she returned, a little impatiently: 'you were speaking of your uncle.'

'Yes. I could not get him to tell me what was the matter; he began to joke: you know his way; men are so tiresome sometimes.'

'It is not always easy to understand them,' she said, turning away her face: 'perhaps they do not wish to be understood. It must be a great comfort to Mr. Cunliffe to have you so near him. I have thought lately that he has seemed a little lonely.'

'But he comes here very often,' I said, rather quickly; 'he need not be dull, with so many friends.'

To my surprise, Miss Hamilton's fair face flushed almost painfully.

'He does not come so often as he used; perhaps he finds us a little too quiet. I am sorry for Giles's sake—oh yes, I do not mean that,' as I looked at her rather reproachfully. 'Of course we all like Mr. Cunliffe.'

I was about to reply to this, when Miss Hamilton suddenly grew a little restless, and the next moment the door-bell sounded.

I rose at once. 'They have come back from church. I will bid you good-bye now.' And, as I expected, she made no effort to keep me.

'You will come again,' she said, kissing me affectionately.

'I have so enjoyed our little talk; you have done me good, indeed you have, Ursula,' watching me from the threshold. I knew I could not escape my fate, so I walked downstairs as coolly as I could, and encountered them all in the hall. Miss Darrell gave a little shriek when she saw me.

'Dear me, Miss Garston, how you startled me! Who would have thought of finding you here on Sunday evening, when all good people are at church!' but here Mr. Hamilton put her aside with little ceremony: he really seemed as though he were glad to see me.

'You came to sit with Gladys: it was very kind and thoughtful of you. Poor girl, she seemed rather dull, but now you have cheered her up.'

'Perhaps Miss Garston will extend her cheering influence, Giles,' observed Miss Darrell in her most staccato manner, 'and remain to supper. Leah will see her home.'

'I am going to perform that office myself, Etta. Will you stay?' looking at me in a friendly manner.

'Not to-night,' I returned hurriedly; 'and, indeed, I can very well walk alone.' But Mr. Hamilton settled that question by putting on his greatcoat.

'Oh, of course Giles will walk with you: how could he do less?' replied Miss Darrell, with a scarcely perceptible sneer. 'You have timed your visit so well that he will be just back to supper. So you have been sitting with dear Gladys? I wonder how you knew she had a cold: private information, I suppose. I should hardly have thought Gladys was well enough to see visitors, she was so feverish when I left her; but that stupid Chatty makes such mistakes.'

'Miss Hamilton was not at all feverish, I assure you. My visit has done her no harm.' And I turned to Lady Betty, who stood on tiptoe to kiss me and breathed a 'thank you' into my ear; but Miss Darrell could not forbear from a parting fling as she bade me good-night.

'We shall wait supper for you, Giles,' she said rather pointedly; but Mr. Hamilton took no notice; he only bade me be careful, as it was rather slippery by the gate, and then he began telling me about the sermon, and, strangely enough, he endorsed my opinion of Max.

'I tell him he must have a change after Christmas; he looks knocked up, and a trifle thin. It will not hurt Tudor to work a little harder; you may tell Cunliffe I say so. Halloo! I

think you had better take my arm, Miss Garston; it is confoundedly dark and slippery.' But I declined this, as I was tolerably sure-footed.

Mr. Hamilton seemed in excellent spirits, and talked well and with great animation, as though he were bent on amusing me; he was a clever man, and had a store of useful information which he did not always care to produce. I never heard him talk better than on this occasion: there were flashes of wit and brilliancy that surprised me: I was almost sorry when I reached the cottage.

'Good-night, Miss Garston, and thank you again for your deed of charity,' he said quite heartily, and as though he meant it. Really, I never liked Mr. Hamilton so much before; but then he had never shown himself so genial. I saw Lady Betty the next morning, and asked her after Miss Hamilton, but I almost regretted my question when the naughty little thing treated me to one of her usual confidences: there was no inducing her to hold her tongue when she was in the humour for chatting.

'Oh, it was such fun!' she said, her eyes dancing with mischief. 'Etta was so cross when you were gone; she declared it was a conspiracy between us three, and that you only wanted Giles to walk home with you. No, I did not mean to repeat that, so please don't look so angry. Etta did not really think so, but she will say these things about people. I tell Gladys Etta wants Giles herself. She scolded Chatty for being so stupid, and said if Leah had been at home she would have shown more sense; and then she went up to Gladys's room in a nice temper, but Gladys would not listen, said she was tired, and ordered Etta out of the room. When Gladys is like that Etta can do nothing with her, so she sulked until Giles came home, and then began teasing him about his gallantry, and wondering how he enjoyed his walk, and you know her way.'

'Lady Betty, I am busy; besides which, I do not wish to hear any more of your cousin's improving conversation.'

'Oh, there is nothing more to tell,' she returned triumphantly. 'Giles silenced her so completely that she did not dare to open her lips again. Oh, she is properly frightened of Giles when he is in one of his moods. He told her that he disliked observations of this sort, that in his opinion they were both undignified and vulgar, especially when they related to a person whom he so much respected as Miss Garston. "And allow

me to remark," he continued, looking at poor little me rather fiercely, as though I were in fault too, "that I shall consider it an honour if Miss Garston bestows her friendship on any member of my household. I am very glad she seems to like Gladys, and I only hope she will do the poor girl good and come every day if she likes, and that is all I mean to say on the subject." But I think he said quite enough; don't you, Miss Garston?' finished naughty Lady Betty, looking up at me with such innocent eyes that I could not have scolded her any more than I could have scolded a kitten.

But if only Lady Betty could learn to hold her tongue——!

CHAPTER XX

ERIC

THAT afternoon I had rather an adventure. I was just walking up the hill on my way to the post-office, when a handsome carriage came round the corner by the church rather sharply, and the same moment a little dog crossing the road in the dusk seemed to be under the horses' feet.

That was my first impression. My next was that the coachman was trying to pull up his horses. There was a sudden howl, the horses kicked and plunged, some one in the carriage shrieked, and then the little dog was in my arms, and even in the dim light I could feel one poor little leg was broken.

The horses were quieted with difficulty, and the footman got down and went to the carriage window.

'It is poor little Flossie, ma'am,' he said, touching his hat: 'she must have got out into the road and recognised the carriage, for she was under the horses' feet. This lady got her out somehow.' And indeed I had no idea how I had managed it. One of the horses had reared, and his front hoof almost touched me as I snatched up Flossie. I suppose it was a risky thing to do, for I never liked the remembrance afterwards, and I do not believe I could have done it again.

'Oh dear! oh dear!' observed a pleasant voice, 'do let me thank the lady. Stand aside, Williams.' And a pretty old lady with white hair looked out at me.

'I am afraid the poor dog's leg is broken,' I observed, as the little animal lay in my arms uttering short barks of pain. 'Happily your man pulled up in time, or it must have been killed.'

'Oh dear! oh dear! what will the colonel say to such carelessness?' exclaimed the old lady. 'He's so fond of Flossie, and makes such a fuss with her. And Mr. Hamilton has gone to Brighton, or I would have sent Flossie in for him to attend to her.'

'Will you let me see what I can do, Mrs. Maberley?' I said, for I had recognised the pretty old lady at once. 'I am the village nurse, Miss Garston, and I think I can bind up poor Flossie's leg.'

'Miss Garston!' in quite a different voice; it seemed to have grown rather formal. 'Oh, I am so much obliged to you, but I am ashamed to give you the trouble; only for poor Flossie's sake,' hesitating, 'will you come into the carriage and let me drive you to Maplehurst?' And to this I readily consented. I could never bear to see an animal in pain, and the little creature, a beautiful brown-and-white spaniel, was already licking my hand confidingly.

I could see Mrs. Maberley was embarrassed by my presence, for she talked in rather a nervous manner about it being Christmas Eve, and how busy the young ladies were decorating the church.

'I wanted to speak to Miss Darrell for a moment,' she went on, 'and I found her and Lady Betty putting up wreaths in the chancel, and that good-looking Mr. Tudor was helping them. I was so sorry poor dear Gladys was not there; but Miss Darrell says her cold is so much better that she is downstairs again. I am afraid she is very delicate and takes after her poor mother.'

'I saw Miss Hamilton yesterday, and I certainly thought she looked very ill.'

'So Miss Darrell told me. What a good, unselfish little creature she is, Miss Garston! I do not know what Mr. Hamilton and his sisters would do without her. Ah, here we are at Maplehurst, and Tracy is looking out for us. Tracy, is the colonel at home? No, I am thankful to hear it. Poor little Flossie has met with an accident, and this lady has saved her life, but she tells me her leg is broken. Now, Miss Garston, will you believe it that I am such a coward that I could not be of the least assistance? Tracy, take Miss Garston into the morning room, and do your best to help her.' And Mrs. Maberley trotted away as fast as she could, while Tracy ushered me into a bright snug-looking room and asked me very civilly what she could do for me.

Tracy was a handy, sensible woman, and in a few minutes I had managed, with her help, to strap up poor Flossie's leg in the most successful manner.

'I am sure, ma'am, Mr. Hamilton couldn't have done better himself,' observed Tracy, looking at me with respectful admiration, while I petted Flossie, who was now lying comfortably in her basket, trying to lick her bandages. 'I must go and tell my mistress that it is done, for she will be fretting herself ill over poor Flossie.'

I expect Tracy sounded my praises, for when Mrs. Maberley entered the room in her pretty cap with gray ribbons there was not a trace of formality in her manner as she thanked me with tears in her eyes for my kindness to Flossie.

'To think of a young creature being so clever!' she said, folding her soft dimpled hands together. 'My dear, the colonel will be so grateful to you: he dotes on Flossie. You must stay and have tea with me, and then he can thank you himself. No, I shall take no refusal. Tracy, tell Marvel to bring up the tea-tray at once. My dear,' turning to me, when Tracy had left the room, 'I am almost ashamed to look you in the face when I remember how long you have been in Heathfield and that I have never called on you; but Etta told me that you did not care to have visitors.'

'Yes, I know, Mrs. Maberley; but that is quite a mistake,' I returned, somewhat eagerly, for I had fallen in love with the pretty old lady, and her tall, aristocratic colonel with his white moustache and grand military carriage, and had watched them with much interest from my place in church. She was such a dainty old lady, like a piece of Dresden china, with her pink cheeks and white curls and old-fashioned shoe-buckles; and she had such beautiful little hands, plump and soft as a baby's, which she seemed to regard with innocent pride, for she was always settling the lace ruffles round her wrists and pinching them up with careful fingers.

'Dear, dear! I thought Etta told me,' she began rather nervously.

'Miss Darrell makes mistakes, like other people,' I answered, smiling. 'I shall be very pleased to know my neighbours; it is quite true that I am not often at home, and just now I am very busy, but all the same I do not mean to shut myself out from society. One owes a duty to one's neighbours.'

'My dear Miss Garston, I am quite pleased to hear you talk

so sensibly. I was afraid from what Etta said that you were a little eccentric and strong-minded, and I have such a dislike to that in young people; young ladies are so terribly independent at the present day, in my opinion, and I know the colonel thinks the same. They are sadly deficient in good manners and reverence. That is why I am so fond of the Hamilton girls: they are perfect young gentlewomen; they never talk slang or slipshod English, and they know how to respect gray hairs. The colonel is devoted to Gladys: I tell him he is as fond of her as though she were his own daughter.'

'I think every one must be fond of Miss Hamilton.'

'Yes, poor darling! and she is much to be pitied,' returned Mrs. Maberley, with a sigh. 'Oh, here comes Marvel with the tea. Now, Miss Garston, my dear, take off that bonnet and jacket: I like people to look as though they were at home. Marvel, draw up that chair to the fire, and give Miss Garston a table to herself, and put the muffins where she can reach them; there, now I think we look comfortable: young people always look nicer without their bonnets; it was a pity to hide your pretty smooth hair. Now tell me a little about yourself. I am sure Etta is wrong: you do not look in the least strong-minded. Tracy said it was wonderful how such slender little fingers could ever do hospital work. She has fallen in love with you, my dear; and Tracy has plenty of penetration. I never can understand why she does not take to Etta; and Etta is so good to her; but there, we all have our prejudices.'

As soon as Mrs. Maberley's ripple of talk had died away, I told her a little about my work, and how much I liked my life at Heathfield, and then I spoke of my great interest in Gladys Hamilton.

It was really very pleasant sitting in this warm, softly-lighted room and talking to this charming, kind-hearted old lady. Christmas Eve was not so dull, after all, as I had expected; it was nice to feel that I was making a new friend,—that the little service I had rendered Mrs. Maberley had broken down the barrier between us and overcome her prejudice. I knew that Miss Darrell had set her against me, and that for some reason of her own she wished to prevent her calling upon me.

Did Miss Darrell dislike my coming to Heathfield? Was she afraid of finding me in her way? Was she at all desirous of making my stay irksome to me? These were some of the questions I was continually asking myself.

I noticed that Mrs. Maberley sighed and shook her head when I spoke of Miss Hamilton. As I warmed to my subject, and praised her beauty and gentleness and intelligence, she sighed still more.

'Yes, she is a dear girl, a dear good girl; but she has never been the same since Eric went. Does she talk to you about Eric, Miss Garston? Etta says she talks of nothing else to her.'

I opened my eyes rather widely at this statement, for I could not forget what Miss Hamilton had said to me that night: 'I have never spoken to any one about Eric.' Was it likely that she would choose Miss Darrell for a *confidante*? But I kept my incredulity to myself, and simply related to Mrs. Maberley the circumstance that I had seen the photograph by accident the previous evening, and only knew then that Miss Hamilton had had a twin-brother.

'How very singular!' she observed, putting down her tea-cup in a hurry. 'I should have thought every one in the place would have spoken about the young man, he was such a favourite; and it was no use Mr. Hamilton trying to keep it a secret. Why, the postmaster's wife told me before Eric had been gone twenty-four hours, and then I went to Mr. Cunliffe. Why, child, do you mean your uncle has never told you about it?'

'Oh no, Uncle Max never repeats anything; he would be the last person from whom I should hear it.'

'And yet he was up at Gladwyn every day,—ay, twice a day; and people said—— But what an old gossip I am! Well, about poor Eric, there can be no harm in your knowing what all the world knows, even Marvel and Tracy; it is a very sore subject with poor Mr. Hamilton, and no one dares to mention Eric's name to him; but, as Etta says, Gladys can never hold her tongue about him when they two are alone together.' I certainly held mine at that moment. I began to wonder what Miss Darrell would say next.

'So you have seen his picture, Miss Garston, my dear: well, now, is it not a beautiful face?—not sufficiently manly, as the colonel says; but then, poor fellow, he had not a strong character. Still, it was a lovely sight to see them together: our gardens join, you know, and often and often, as I have sat under our beech, I have seen Gladys and Eric walking up and down the little avenue, with his arm round her, and their two heads shining like gold, and she would be talking to him and smiling in his face, until it made me quite young to see them.'

'Wait a moment, Mrs. Maberley, please. I am deeply interested; but would Gladys—would Miss Hamilton like me to know all this?'

'To be sure she would,—though perhaps she would not care for the pain of telling it herself; but it would be better for you to hear it from me than from Mrs. Barton, or Mrs. Drabble, or any other gossiping person that takes it into her head to tell you, for you could not be much longer at Heathfield without hearing of it, when, as I say, every Jack and Tom in the village knows it,—though how it all got about is more than I can say. I tell the colonel, Leah must have had a hand in it: I know it was she who told Tracy.'

I saw by this time that Mrs. Maberley had quite made up her mind to tell me the story herself; she was garrulous, like many other old ladies, and perhaps she enjoyed a little gossip about her neighbours, so I only essayed one other feeble protest.

'I hope Mr. Hamilton will not mind——' but she answered me quite briskly,—

'Well, poor fellow, he knows by this time people will talk; I daresay he thinks Mr. Cunliffe has told you. Now, I do not want to blame Mr. Hamilton; he is a great favourite of mine ever since he cured the colonel's gout, and I would not be hard on him for worlds; but I have always been afraid that he did not rightly understand Eric; the brothers were so different. Mr. Hamilton is very hard-working and rather matter-of-fact, and Eric was quite different, more like a girl, dreamy and enthusiastic and terribly idle, and then he fancied himself an artist. Mr. Hamilton could not bear that.'

'Why not? An artist's is a very good profession.'

'Yes, but he did not believe in his talent; and then Eric was intended for the law; his brother had sent him to Oxford, but he would not work, and he was extravagant, and got into debt,—and, oh yes, there was no end of trouble. I do not know how it was,' went on Mrs. Maberley, 'but Eric always seemed in the wrong. Etta used to take his part,—which was very good of her, as Eric could not bear her and treated her most rudely. Mr. Hamilton used to complain that Gladys encouraged him in his idleness; he sometimes came in here of an evening looking quite miserable, poor fellow, and would say that his sisters and Eric were leagued against him; that but for Etta he would be at his wits' end what to do. Eric would not obey him; he simply defied his authority; he was growing more

idle every day, and when he remonstrated with him, Gladys took his part. Oh dear, I am afraid they were all very wretched.'

'You think Mr. Hamilton did not understand his young brother.'

'Well, perhaps not. You see, Mr. Hamilton had not the same temptations; he was always steady and hard-working from a boy, and never cared much about his own comfort. As for getting into debt, why, he would have considered it wicked to do so. I know the colonel thought once or twice that he was a little hard on Eric. I remember his saying once 'that boys will be boys, and that all are not good alike, and that he must not use the curb too much.' It was a pity, certainly, that Mr. Hamilton was so angry about his painting. I daresay it was only a temporary craze. I am afraid, though, Eric must have behaved very badly. I know he struck his elder brother once. Anyhow, things went on from bad to worse; and one day a dreadful thing happened. A cheque of some value, I have forgotten the particulars, was stolen from Mr. Hamilton's desk, and the next day Eric disappeared.'

'Was he accused of taking it?'

'To be sure. Leah saw him with her own eyes. You must ask Mr. Cunliffe about all that; my memory is apt to be treacherous about details. I know Leah saw him with his hand in his brother's desk, and though Eric vowed it was only to put a letter there,—a very impertinent letter that he had written to his brother,—still the cheque was gone, and, as they heard afterwards, cashed by a very fair young man at some London Bank; and the next morning, after some terrible quarrel, during which Gladys fainted, poor girl, Eric disappeared, and the very next thing they heard of him, about three weeks afterwards, was that his watch and a pocket-book belonging to him had been picked up on the Brighton beach close to Hove.'

'Do you mean that this is all they have ever heard of him?'

'Yes. I believe Mr. Hamilton employed every means of ascertaining his fate. For some months he refused to believe that he was dead. I am not sure if Gladys believes it now. But Etta did from the first. "He was weak and reckless enough for anything," she has often said to me. Of course it is very terrible, and one cannot bear to think of it, but when a young man has lost his character he has not much pleasure in his life.'

'I do not think Miss Hamilton really believes that he is dead.'

'Perhaps not, poor darling. But Mr. Hamilton has no doubt on the subject, my dear Miss Garston. He is much to be pitied: he has never been the same man since Eric went. I am afraid that he repents of his harshness to the poor boy. He told the colonel once that he wished he had tried milder treatment.

'One can understand Mr. Hamilton's feelings so well. You are right, Mrs. Maberley: he is much to be pitied.'

'Yes, and, to make matters worse, Gladys was very ill, and refused to see or speak to him in her illness. I believe the breach is healed between them now; but she is not all that a sister ought to be to him.'

'Perhaps Miss Darrell usurps her place,' I replied a little incautiously, but I saw my mistake at once. Mrs. Maberley was evidently a devout believer in Miss Darrell's merits.

'Oh, my dear, you must not say such things. Mr. Hamilton has told me over and over again that he does not know how he would have got through that miserable time but for his cousin Etta's kindness. She did everything for him, and nursed Gladys in her illness. I am sure she would have died but for Etta. Dear me! Flossie looks restless. I do believe she hears her master's step outside.—Yes, Flossie, that is his knock.—But I wonder whom he is bringing in with him.' And Mrs. Maberley straightened herself and smoothed the folds of her satin gown, and tried to look as usual, though there were tears in her bright eyes and her hands were a little tremulous. I do not know why I felt so sure that it would be Mr. Hamilton, but I was not at all surprised when he followed the tall old colonel into the room. But he certainly looked astonished when he saw me.

'Miss Garston!' he ejaculated, darting one of his keen looks at me. But when he had shaken hands he sat down by Mrs. Maberley somewhat silently.

I was rather sorry to see Mr. Hamilton, for our talk had unsettled me and made me feel nervous in his presence. I was afraid he would read something from our faces. And I certainly saw him look at me more than once, as though something had aroused his suspicion. For the first time I was unwilling to encounter one of those straight glances. I felt guilty, as though I must avoid his eyes, but all the more I felt he was watching me.

I was anxious to put a stop to this uncomfortable state of things, but I could not silence Mrs. Maberley, who was relating to her husband the story of poor Flossie's accident. My

presence of mind and skill were so much lauded, and the colonel said so many civil things, that I felt myself getting hotter every moment.

Mr. Hamilton came at last to my relief.

'I think Miss Garston resembles me in one thing, colonel. She hates to be thanked for doing her duty. You will drive her away if you say any more about Flossie. Oh, I thought so,' as I stretched out my hand for my hat: 'I thought I interpreted that look aright. Well, I must be going too. I only brought him back safe to you, Mrs. Maberley.—By the bye, colonel, I shall tell Gladys that you have never asked after her.'

'My sweetheart, Gladys! To be sure I have not. Well, how is she, my dear fellow?'

'As obstinate as ever, colonel. Came downstairs to-day, and declares she will go to early service to-morrow, because it will be Christmas Day, and she has never missed yet. Women are kittle cattle to manage. Now, Miss Garston, if you are ready, I will see you a little on your way.'

I knew it was no good to remonstrate, so I held my peace. Mrs. Maberley kissed me quite affectionately, and begged me to come whenever I had an hour to spare.

'I wish I had known you before, my dear. But there, we all make mistakes sometimes.' And she patted me on the shoulder. 'Edbrooke, will you see them out? He will be your friend for ever, after your goodness to Flossie: won't you, Edbrooke?'

I never felt so afraid of Mr. Hamilton before. I was wondering what I should say to him, and hoping that he had not noticed my nervousness, when he startled me excessively by saying,—

'What makes you look so odd this evening? You are not a bit yourself, Miss Garston. Come! I shall expect you to confess. Mrs. Maberley is an old friend of mine, and I am very much attached to her. I should like to know what you and she have been talking about?'

It was too dark for Mr. Hamilton to see my face, so I answered a little flippantly,—

'I daresay you would like to know. Women are certainly not much more curious than men, after all.'

'Oh, as to that, I am not a bit curious,' was the contradictory answer. 'But all the same I intend to know. So you may as well make a clean breast of it.'

'But—but you have no right to be so inquisitive, Mr. Hamilton.'

'Again I say I am not inquisitive, but I mean to know this. Mrs. Maberley had been crying. I could see the tears in her eyes. You looked inclined to cry too, Miss Garston. Now,'—after a moment's hesitation, as though he found speech rather difficult,—'I know the dear old lady has only one fault. She is rather too fond of gossiping about her neighbours, though she does it in the kindest manner. May I ask if her talk this evening at all related to a family not a hundred miles away from Maplehurst?'

His voice sounded hard and satirical in the darkness. 'I wish you would not ask me such a question, Mr. Hamilton,' I returned, much distressed. 'It was not my fault: I did not wish——' But he interrupted me.

'Of course; I knew it. When am I ever deceived by a face or manner? Not by yours, certainly. So my good old friend told you about that miserable affair. I wish she had held her tongue a little longer. I wish——'

But I burst out, full of remorse,—

'Oh, Mr. Hamilton, I am so sorry! I have no right to know, but indeed I was hardly to blame.'

'Who says you are to blame?' he returned, so harshly that I remained silent: 'it is no fault of yours if people will not be silent. But all the same I am sorry that you know; your opinion of me is quite changed now, eh? You think me a hard-hearted taskmaster of a brother. Well, it does not matter: Gladys would have made you believe that in time.'

His voice was so full of concentrated bitterness that I longed to say something consoling; in his own fashion he had been kind to me, and I did not wish to misjudge him.

'I know your sister Gladys sufficiently to be sure that she will never act ungenerously by her brother,' I returned hotly. 'Mr. Hamilton, you need not say such things: it is not for me to judge.'

'But all the same you will judge,' he replied moodily. 'Oh, I know how you good women cling together: you know nothing of a man's nature; you cannot estimate his difficulties; because he has not got your sweet nature, because he cannot bear insolence patiently—— Oh,' with an abruptness that was almost rude but for the concealed pain in his voice, 'I am not going to excuse myself to you: why should I? I have only

to account to my Maker and my own conscience.' And he was actually walking off in the darkness, for we were now in sight of the parlour window, but I called him back so earnestly that he could not refuse to obey.

'Mr. Hamilton, pray do not leave me like this; it makes me unhappy. Do you know it is Christmas Eve?'

'Well, what of that?' with a short laugh.

'People ought not to quarrel and be disagreeable to each other on Christmas Eve.'

'I am afraid, Miss Garston, that I do feel intensely disagreeable this evening.'

'Yes, but you must try and forgive me all the same. I could not quite help myself; but indeed I do not mean to judge you or any one, and I should like you to shake hands.'

'There, then,' with a decidedly hearty grasp; and then, without releasing me, 'So you don't think so very badly of me, after all?'

'I am very sorry for you,' was my prudent answer; 'I think you have had a great deal to bear. Good-night, Mr. Hamilton.'

'Wait a minute; you have not answered my question. You must not have it all your own way. I repeat, has Mrs. Maberley given you a very bad impression of my character?'

'Certainly not; oh, she spoke most kindly; I should not have been afraid if you had heard the whole of our conversation.'

'I wish I had heard it.'

'She made me feel very sorry for you all. Oh, what trouble there is in the world, Mr. Hamilton! It does seem so blind and foolish to sit in judgment on other people! how can we know their trials and temptations?'

'That is spoken like a sensible woman. Try to keep a good opinion of us, Miss Garston: we shall be the better for your friendship. Well, so we are friends again, and this little misunderstanding is healed: so much the better; I should hate to quarrel with you. Now run in out of the cold.'

I hastened to obey him, but he stood at the gate until I had entered the house; his voice and manner had quite changed during the last few minutes, and had become strangely gentle, reminding me of his sister Gladys's voice. What a singular man he was!—and yet I felt sorry for him. 'I wonder if he is really to blame!' I thought, as I opened the parlour door.

The lamp was alight; the fire burnt ruddily; Tinker was

stretched on the rug as usual, but something else was on the rug too.

A girlish figure in a dark tweed gown was huddled up before the grate; a head, with short thick locks of hair tossing roughly on her neck, turned quickly at my entrance.

'Jill!'

'Yes, it is I, Ursie dear! Oh, you darling bear, what a time you have been!' Two strong arms pulled me down in the usual fashion, and a hot cheek was pressed lovingly against mine.

'Oh, Jill, Jill, what does this mean?' I exclaimed, in utter amazement; but for a long time Jill only laughed and hugged me, and there was no getting an answer to my question.

CHAPTER XXI

'I RAN AWAY, THEN!'

'Now, Jill,' I demanded, at last, taking her by the shoulders, 'I insist on knowing what this means.' And when I spoke in that tone Jill always obeyed me at once.

So she shook her untidy mane, and looked at me with eyes that were brimful of fun and naughtiness.

'Very well, Ursie dear, if you will know, you shall; but first sit down in that cosy-looking chair, and I will put my elbows in your lap, in the dear old fashion, and then we can talk nicely. What a snug little room this is! it looked just delicious when I came in, and Mrs. Barton made me such a nice cup of tea, and then I went upstairs to look at your bedroom, and there was a beautiful fire there, and Mrs. Barton says you always have one: so you are not so poor and miserable, after all.'

'I am not at all poor, thank you; and I work so hard that I think I deserve to be warm and comfortable. And when people live alone, a fire is a nice, cheerful companion. But this is not answering my question, Jocelyn.'

Now Jill hated me to call her Jocelyn, so she made a face at me, and said, in rather a grumpy voice, 'Well, I ran away, then!'

'Ran away from Hyde Park Gate! Were you mad, Jill?'

'Oh dear, no,—not from Hyde Park Gate. Did you not get my letter? Oh, I remember, I forgot to post it: it is in my blotting-case now. Then you did not know that Sara has scarlatina?'

'No, indeed; but I am very sorry to hear it.'

'Oh, she is nearly well now; but no one knows how she caught it. There was a terrible fuss when Dr. Armstrong pronounced it scarlatina. Mamma made father take lodgings at Brighton at once, and Fräulein and I were packed off there at a minute's notice. You can fancy what my life has been for the last ten days, mewed up in a dull, ugly parlour with that old cat.'

'My poor, dear Jill! But why did you not write to me, and I would have come over at once?'

'So I did write, twice, and I do believe that horrid creature never posted my letters,—I daresay they are in her pocket now,—and I could not get out by myself until to-day. Now just think, Ursula, what sort of a Christmas Day I was likely to have; and then you never came to me, and I got desperate; so when Fräulein said she had one of her headaches,' and here Jill made a comical grimace, 'I just made up my mind to take French leave, and spend Christmas Day with you, and here I am; and scold me if you dare, and I will hug you to death.' And, indeed, Jill's powerful young arms were quite capable of fulfilling her threat.

'It is not for me to scold you,' I replied quietly; 'but I am afraid you will get into trouble for this piece of recklessness. Think how frightened poor Fräulein will be when she misses you.'

'Poor Fräulein, indeed! a deceitful creature like that. Why, Ursula, what do you think? I just peeped into her room to be sure that she was safe and it was all dark: she was not there at all. Oh, oh, my lady, I said to myself, so that is your little game, is it? And, just to be certain, I rang at the bell at 37 Brunswick Place, where the Schumackers live, and asked the servant if Fräulein Hennig was still there, and when I heard that she was having tea I nearly laughed in his face. What do you think of that for an instructress of youth,—getting up the excuse of a headache, and leaving me over those stupid lessons, while she paid a visit on her own account? Does she not deserve a thorough good fright as a punishment?'

'I think Aunt Philippa ought to be undeceived. I have never trusted Fräulein Hennig since you told me she shut herself up in her bedroom to read novels. Jill, my dear, you have acted very wrongly, and I am afraid we shall all get into trouble over this school-girl trick of yours. I must think what is best to be done under the circumstances.'

'You may think as much as you like,' returned Jill obstinately, 'but I have come to spend my Christmas Day with you, and nothing will induce me to go back to Fräulein: I shall murder her if I do. Now, Ursie darling,' in a coaxing voice, 'do be nice, and make much of me. You can't think how delicious it is to see your face again; it is such a dear face, and I like it ever so much better than Sara's and Lesbia's.'

I was unable to reply to this flattering speech, for Jill suddenly put up her hand—I noticed it was a little inky—and said, 'Hark, there is some one coming up to the door?' and for the moment we both believed that it was Fräulein; but, to Jill's immense relief, it was only Mr. Tudor, with a great bough of holly in his hand.

'We have just finished at the church, and I have brought you this, Miss Garston,' he began, and then he stopped, and said, 'Miss Jocelyn here!' in a tone of extreme surprise, and Jill got up rather awkwardly and shook hands with him. I could see that she felt shy and uncomfortable. I was very pleased to see Mr. Tudor, for I knew he would help us in this emergency. Jill was such a child, in spite of her womanly proportions, that I was sure that her escapade would not seriously shock him; he was young enough himself to have a fellow-feeling for her; and I was not wrong. Mr. Tudor looked decidedly amused when I told him Jill had taken French leave. He tried to look grave until I had finished, but the effort was too much for him, and he burst out laughing.

Jill, who was looking very sulky, was so charmed by his merriment that she began to laugh too, and we were all as cheerful as possible until I called them to order, and asked Mr. Tudor if he would send off a telegram at once.

'A telegram! Oh, Ursula!' And Jill's dimples disappeared like magic.

'My dear, Fräulein would not have a moment's sleep to-night if she did not know you were safe. Do not be afraid, Jill: we will spend our Christmas Day together, in spite of all the Fräuleins in the world.' And then I wrote off the telegram, and a short note, and gave them to Mr. Tudor. The telegram was necessarily brief:

'Jocelyn safe with me. Will not return until Thursday. Write to explain.'

The note was more explanatory.

I apologised profusely to Fräulein for her pupil's naughti-

ness, but begged her to say nothing to her mother, as I would communicate myself with Aunt Philippa and let her know what had happened. Under the circumstances I thought it better to keep Jocelyn with me over Christmas Day, until I heard from Aunt Philippa. But she might depend on my bringing her back myself.

'It is far too polite,' growled Jill, who had been reading the letter over my shoulder. 'How can you cringe so to that creature?'

'I consider it a masterpiece of diplomacy,' observed Mr. Tudor, as I handed it for his inspection. 'Civil words pay best in the long-run; and you know it was very naughty to run away, Miss Jocelyn.'

'It was nothing of the kind,' returned Jill rebelliously. 'And I would do it again to-morrow. I am more than sixteen; I am not a child now, and I have a right to come and see Ursula if I like.' And Jill threw back her head, and the colour came into her face, and she looked so handsome that I was not surprised to see Mr. Tudor regard her attentively. I never saw a face so capable of varying expression as Jill's.

Jill declared she was glad when Mr. Tudor was gone. But I think she liked him very well on the whole; and, indeed, no one could dislike such a bright, kind-hearted fellow. As soon as he had left the house I had to call a council. It was quite certain my bed would not hold Jill; so, at Mrs. Barton's suggestion, some spare mattresses were dragged in my room and a bed made up on the floor. Jill voted this delicious; nothing could have pleased her more, and she was so talkative and excited that I had the greatest trouble in coaxing her to be quiet and let me go to sleep: in fact, I had to feign sleep to make her hold her tongue.

But I was much too restless to sleep, and once when I crept out of bed to replenish the fire I stood still for a moment to look at Jill.

She was sleeping as placidly as an infant in its cradle, her short black locks pushed back from her face, and one arm stretched on the coverlet. I was surprised to see how fine Jill's face really was. The ugly duckling, as Uncle Brian called her, was fast changing into a swan. At present she was too big and undeveloped for grace; her awkward manners and angularities made people think her rough and uncouth. 'I expect she will eclipse Sara's commonplace prettiness some day; but, poor child,

no one understands her,' I sighed, and as I tucked her up more warmly, with a kiss, Jill's sleepy arms found their way to my neck and held me there. 'Is not it delicious, Ursie dear?' she murmured drowsily.

I was glad to see that Miss Hamilton was at the early service. She looked pale and delicate, but there was a brighter look upon her face when she nodded to me in the porch. Her brother was putting her into a fly, and Miss Darrell and Lady Betty followed.

I was rather surprised to see him close the door after them and step back into the porch. And the next moment he joined us.

'Well, Miss Garston,' holding out his hand, with a friendly smile, 'you see Gladys contrived to have her way. A happy Christmas to you! But I see you are not alone,' looking rather inquisitively at Jill, who looked very big and shy as usual.

'I think you have heard of my cousin Jocelyn?' I returned, without entering into any further particulars. I should have been sorry for Jill's escapade to reach Mr. Hamilton's ears. But he shook hands with her at once, and said, very pleasantly, that he had heard of her from Mr. Cunliffe. And then, after a few more words, we parted.

Mr. Hamilton was unusually genial this morning. There was nothing in his manner to recall our stormy interview on the previous evening. Perhaps he wished to efface the recollection from my memory, for there was something significant in his smile, as though we perfectly understood each other.

I had lain awake for a long time thinking over Mrs. Maberley's talk and that uncomfortable walk from Maplehurst. Mr. Hamilton's voice and words haunted me; the suppressed irritation and pain that almost mastered him, and how he had flung away from me in the darkness.

I was glad to remember that I had called him back and spoken a conciliatory word. No doubt he had been to blame. I could imagine him hard and bitter to a fault. But he had suffered; there were lines upon his face that had been traced by no common experience. No, it was not for me to judge him. As he said, what could I know of a man's nature? And I was still more glad when I saw Mr. Hamilton in the church porch, and knew that the day's harmony was not disturbed, and that there was peace between us. His bright, satisfied smile made me feel more cheerful.

'What a strange-looking man!' observed Jill, in rather a

grumbling voice, as we walked up the hill. 'Is that Mr. Hamilton? I thought he was young; but he is quite old, Ursula.'

'No, dear, not more than three- or four-and-thirty, Uncle Max says.'

'Well, I call that old,' returned Jill, with the obstinacy of sixteen. 'He is an old bachelor, too, for of course nobody wants to marry him; he is too ugly.'

'Oh, Jill, how absurd you are! Mr. Hamilton is not ugly at all. You will soon get used to his face. It is only rather peculiar.' And I quite meant what I said, for I had got used to it myself.

'Humph!' observed Jill significantly. But she did not explain the meaning of her satirical smile, and I proceeded to call her attention to the hoar-frost that lay on the cottage roof, and the beauty of the clear winter sky. 'It is a glorious Christmas morning,' I finished.

'We had a very merry breakfast, for Jill was almost wild with spirits, and then we went to church again. Gladys was in her usual place, and looked round at me with a smile as I entered. When the service was over, I went to the Marshalls', accompanied by Jill, who announced her intention of not letting me out of her sight, for I had to preside over the children's Christmas dinner, and to look after my patient. We visited Robin next, and then went on to the Lockes', and Jill sat open-eyed and breathless in a corner of the room as I sang carols to Phœbe in the twilight.

She rose reluctantly when I put my hand on her shoulder and told her that we must hurry back to the cottage to make ourselves smart for the evening. Jill seldom troubled her head about such sublunary affairs as dress.

'I shall be obliged to wear my old tweed,' she said contentedly. 'I have only to smooth my hair, and then I shall be ready.' And she grumbled not a little when I insisted on arranging a beautiful spray of holly as a breast-knot, and twisting some very handsome coral beads that Charlie had given me round her neck. Jill always looked better for a touch of warm colour: the dark-red berries just suited her brown skin. 'You will do better now,' I said, pushing her away gently, 'so you need not pout and hunch your shoulders. Have I not told you that it is your duty to make the best of yourself?—we cannot be all handsome, but we need not offend our neighbours' eyes.' But, as usual, Jill turned a deaf ear to my philosophy.

The study looked very cosy when we entered it, and Uncle Max gave us a warm welcome. To be sure, he shook his head at Jill, and told her that he was afraid she was a naughty girl, but both he and Mr. Tudor prudently refrained from teasing her on the subject of her escapade. On the contrary, they treated her with profound respect, as though she were a grown-up, sensible young lady, and this answered with Jill. She grew bright and animated, forgot her shyness, and talked in her quaint racy manner. I could see that Mr. Tudor was much taken with her. She was so different from the stereotyped young lady; her cleverness and originality amused him; and I am sure Uncle Max was equally surprised and pleased.

I could see Max was making strenuous efforts to be cheerful, but every now and then he relapsed into gravity. After dinner I drew him aside a moment to speak to him about Jill: to my relief, he promised to be the bearer of a letter to Aunt Philippa.

'I want to go up to town for a day or two,' he said, 'and I may as well do this business for you. How happy the child looks, Ursula! I wish you could keep her a little longer. She is very much improved. I had no idea that there was so much in her; she will be far more attractive than Sara when she has developed a moderate amount of vanity.' And I fully endorsed this opinion.

We went home early, for I could see Max was very tired, but both he and Mr. Tudor insisted on escorting us. It was a beautiful starlight night, clear and frosty: our footsteps rang crisply on the ground: not a breath of wind stirred the skeleton branches that stretched above our heads: a solemn peacefulness seemed to close us round. Jill's mirthful laugh quite startled the echoes. She and Mr. Tudor were following very slowly. Once or twice we stood still and waited for them, but Mr. Tudor was in the middle of some amusing story, and so they took no notice of us.

I told Max about my visit to Mrs. Maberley, and of the conversation that had taken place between us. I thought he started a little when I mentioned Eric Hamilton's name.

'What a pity!' he said quietly. 'I had hoped she would have told you herself. I was waiting for her to do so.'

'But, Max, surely you might have told me?'

'Who?—I? I should not have presumed. You must remember that I was in Hamilton's confidence, and,' after a moment's hesitation, 'in hers too. Ursula,' with a sudden

passionate inflexion in his voice, 'you have no idea how she loved that poor boy, and how she suffered: it nearly killed her. Now you know why I say that she is lonely and wants a friend.'

'But she has you, Max,' I exclaimed involuntarily, for I knew what he must have been to them in their trouble; Max could be as tender as a woman; but he started aside as though I had struck him; and his voice was quite changed as he answered me.

'You mistake, Ursula. I was only her clergyman: if she confided in me it was because she could not do otherwise; she is naturally reserved. She would find it easier to be open with you.'

'I do not think so, Max. I—— But what does it matter what I think? There is one question I want to ask: do you think Mr. Hamilton was at all to blame?'

'I am Hamilton's friend,' he returned, in a tone that made me regret that I had asked the question, and then he stood still and waited for the others to join us. Indeed, he did not speak again, except to wish us good-night.

'It is the loveliest Christmas Day I have ever spent,' cried Jill, flinging herself on me, and she was no light weight. 'I do like Mr. Tudor so; he is nicer than any one I know, more like a nice funny boy than a man, only he tells me he can be grave sometimes. What was the matter with Mr. Cunliffe?—he looks tired and worried and not inclined to laugh.' And so Jill chattered on without waiting for my answers, talking in the very fulness of her young heart, until I pretended again to be asleep, and then she consented to be quiet.

I saw Max for a few minutes the next day when he came to fetch my letter. He looked more like himself, only there was still a tired expression about his eyes; but he talked very cheerfully of what he should do during the few days he intended to remain in town.

I made him promise to be very diplomatic with Aunt Philippa, and he most certainly kept his word, for the next morning I received a letter that surprised us both, and that drove Jill nearly frantic with joy.

Aunt Philippa's letter was very long and rambling. She began by expressing herself as deeply shocked and grieved at Jocelyn's behaviour, which was both dishonourable and unladylike, and had given her father great pain. 'Dear old dad! I don't believe it,' observed Jill, pursing her lips at this.

Aunt Philippa regretted that she could no longer trust her young daughter,—she was sure Sara would never have behaved so at her age,—and she felt much wounded by Jocelyn's defiant action. At the same time, she was equally deceived in Fräulein Hennig, she was certainly more to blame than Jocelyn. Mr. Cunliffe had told her things that greatly surprised her. Uncle Brian was very angry, and insisted that she should be dismissed. Under these distressing circumstances, and as it would not be safe for Jocelyn to come back to Hyde Park Gate until the rooms had been properly disinfected, she must beg me as a favour to herself and Uncle Brian to keep Jocelyn with me until they went to Hastings. Mr. Cunliffe knew of a finishing governess, a Miss Gillespie, who was most highly recommended as a well-principled and thoroughly cultured person, only she would not be at liberty for three or four weeks. As I reached this point of Aunt Philippa's letter, I was obliged to lay it down to prevent myself from being strangled.

'Well, Jill, there is no need to hug me to death: it is Uncle Max that you have to thank, and not me.'

'Yes, but you see it would never do to hug him, for he is not a bit my uncle, so I am doing it by deputy,' observed Jill recklessly. 'Oh, Ursula, what a darling you are! and what a dear fellow he is! To think of my staying here three or four weeks! You will let me help you nurse people, won't you?' very coaxingly.

'We will see about that presently; but, Jill, you have never opened your mother's letter. Now, as it is perfectly impossible that you can sleep on the floor for weeks, and as I do not intend to keep such a chatterbox in my room, I am going to see what Mrs. Barton advises.' And leaving Jill to digest Aunt Philippa's scolding as well as she could, I went in search of the little widow.

I found, to my relief, that there was another room in the cottage, though it could not boast of much furniture beyond a bed and wash-stand: so, after a little consideration, I started off to the vicarage to hold a consultation with Mrs. Drabble.

The upshot of our talk was so satisfactory, and Mrs. Barton and Nathaniel worked so well in my service, that when bedtime came Jill found herself the possessor of quite a snug room. There were curtains up at the window, and strips of carpet on the floor. A dressing-table had been improvised out of a deal packing-case, and covered with clean dimity. Jill's travelling-

box stood in one corner, and on the wall there was a row of neat pegs for Jill's dresses. Jill exclaimed at the clean trim look of the room, but I am sure she regretted her bed on the floor. She came down presently in her scarlet dressing-gown to give me a final hug and reiterate her petition for work.

'Mamma has talked a lot of rubbish about my keeping up my studies and practising two hours a day, and she means to disinfect my books and send them down, but I have made up my mind that I will not open one. I am going to enjoy myself, and nurse sick people, and do real work, instead of grinding away at that stupid German.' And Jill set her little white teeth, and looked determined, so I thought it best not to contradict her.

'I am so glad Uncle Max thought of Miss Gillespie, dear.'

'Who is she? I hate her already. I expect she is only an Anglicised Fräulein,' observed Jill, with a vixenish look.

'You are quite wrong. Miss Gillespie is Scotch, and she is very nice and good, and pretty too, for I have often heard Uncle Max talk of her. Her father was Max's great friend, and at his death the daughters were obliged to go out in the world. Miss Gillespie is the eldest. No, she is not very young,—nearly forty, I believe,—but she is so nice-looking; she was engaged to a clergyman, but he died, and they had been engaged so many years, and so now she will not marry. She is very cheerful, however, and all her pupils love her, and I am sure you will be happy with her, Jill.'

Jill would not quite allow this, but the next day she recurred to the subject, and asked me a good many questions about Miss Gillespie, and when I told her that it was settled that Miss Gillespie should join them at Hastings she really looked quite pleased; but nothing would induce her to open the case of books Aunt Philippa had sent down, and when I told Uncle Max he only laughed.

'Let her be as idle as she likes. She is over-educated now, and knows far more than most girls of her age. Take her about with you, and make her useful.' And I followed this advice implicitly, but for a different reason,—there was no keeping Mr. Tudor out of the house; so when I was engaged, and Jill could not be with me, I took advantage of a general invitation that Miss Hamilton had given me, and sent her up to Gladwyn.

They were all very kind to her, and she seemed to amuse

Miss Darrell, but after a time Mr. Tudor began going there too, and then indeed I should have been at my wits' end, only Mrs. Maberley came to my rescue. She took a fancy to Jill, and Jill reciprocated it, and presently she and Lady Betty began to spend most of their idle hours at Maplehurst.

CHAPTER XXII

'THEY HAVE BLACKENED HIS MEMORY FALSELY'

I LOVED having Jill with me, but I could not deny to myself or other people that I found her a great responsibility. In the first place, I had so little leisure to devote to her, for just after Christmas I was unusually busy. Poor Mrs. Marshall died on the eve of the New Year, and both Mr. Hamilton and I feared that Elspeth would soon follow her.

A hard frost had set in, and granny's feeble strength seemed to succumb under the pressure of the severe cold; she had taken to her bed, and lay there growing weaker every day. Poor Mary had died very peacefully, with her hand in her husband's. I had been with her all day, and I did not leave until it was all over.

Jill was as good as gold, and helped me with Elspeth and the children, and she always spent an hour or two with Robin; but by and by she began asking to go up to Gladwyn of her own accord, or proposing to have tea with Mrs. Maberley.

'Of course I would prefer to stop with you, Ursie dear,' she said affectionately; 'I would rather talk to you than to any one else; but then, you see, you are never at home, and when you do come in, poor darling, you are so tired that you are only fit for a nap.' And I could not deny that this was the truth. After my hard day's work I was not always disposed for Jill's lively chatter, and yet her bright face was a very pleasant sight for tired eyes.

I used to question her sometimes about her visits to Gladwyn, and she was always ready to talk of what had passed in the day. She and Lady Betty had struck up quite a friendship: this

rather surprised me, as they were utterly dissimilar, and had different tastes and pursuits. Jill was far superior in intelligence and intellectual power; she had wider sympathies, too; and though Lady Betty had a fund of originality, and was fresh and *naïve*, I could hardly understand Jill's fancy for her, until Jill said one day,—

'I do like that dear Lady Betty, she is such a crisp little piece of human goods; no one has properly unfolded her, or tested her good qualities; she is quite new and fresh, a novelty in girls. One never knows what she will say or do next: it is that that fascinates me, I believe; because,' went on Jill, and her great eyes grew bright and puzzled, 'it is not that she is clever; one gets to the bottom of her at once; there is not enough depth to drown you.'

Jill did not take so readily to Gladys; she admired her, even liked her, but frankly owned that she found her depressing. 'If I talk to her long, I get a sort of ache over me,' she observed, in her graphic way. 'It is not that she looks dreadfully unhappy, but that there is no happiness in her face. Do you know what I mean? for I am apt to be vague. It rests me to look at you, Ursula; there is something quiet and comfortable in your expression; now, Miss Hamilton looks as though she had lost something she values, or never had it, and must go on looking for it, like that poor ghost lady who wanted to find her lost pearl.'

Jill never could be induced to say much in Mr. Hamilton's favour, though he was very civil to her and paid her a great deal of attention. 'Oh, him!' she would say contemptuously, if I ever hazarded an observation: 'I never take much notice of odd-looking, ugly men: they may be clever, but they are not in my line. Mr. Hamilton stares too much for my taste, and I don't believe he is kind to his sisters; they are half afraid of him.' And nothing would induce her to alter her opinion.

But Miss Darrell thoroughly amused her. Jill's shrewd, honest eyes were hardly in fault there: she used to narrate with glee any little fact she could glean about 'the lady with two faces,' as she used to call her.

'Oh, she is a deep one,' Jill would say. 'I could not understand her at first. I thought she was just bright and talkative and good-natured, and I thought it nice to sit and listen to her, and she was very kind, and petted me a good deal, and I did not find her out at first.'

'Find her out! what do you mean, Jill?' I asked innocently.

'Why, that she is not good-natured a bit, really,' with a sagacious nod of her head. 'She keeps a stock of smiles for Cousin Giles and any chance visitor. She is not half so nice and charming when Miss Hamilton and Lady Betty are alone with her. Oh, I heard her one day, when I was in the conservatory with Lady Betty. Lady Betty held up her finger and said, 'Hush!' and there she was talking in such a disagreeable, sneering voice to Miss Hamilton, only I stopped my ears and would not listen. And now she has got used to me she says unpleasant little things before my face, and then when "dear Cousin Giles" comes in'—and here Jill looked wicked—'she is all sweetness and amiability, quite charming, in fact. Now, that is what I hate, for a person to wear two faces, and have different voices: it shows they are not true.'

'Well, perhaps you are right, dear'; for, without being uncharitable to Miss Darrell, I wished to put Jill on her guard a little.

'I don't like the way she talks about you,' went on Jill indignantly. 'She always begins when we are alone; not exactly saying things so much as implying them.'

'Indeed! What sort of things?' I asked carelessly.

'Oh, she is always hinting that it is rather odd for you to be living alone; she calls you deliciously unconventional and strong-minded, but I know what she means by that. Then she is so curious: she is always trying to find out how often Mr. Cunliffe or Mr. Tudor comes to see you, or if you go to the vicarage; and she said one day that she thought you preferred gentlemen's society to ladies', as they could never induce you to come up to Gladwyn, but of course you saw plenty of her cousin Giles in the village.'

I felt my cheeks burn at this unwarrantable accusation, but Jill begged me not to disturb myself.

'She won't make those sort of speeches to me again,' she said calmly. 'She had a piece of my mind then that will last her for a long time.'

'I hope you were not rude, Jill?'

'Oh no! I only flew into a passion, and asked her how she dared to imply such a thing?—that my cousin Ursula was the best and the dearest woman in the world, and that no one else could hold a candle to her. "Ursula care for gentlemen's society!" I exclaimed: "why, at Hyde Park Gate we never could get her to remain in the drawing-room when those stupid officers

were there: she never would talk to any of them, except old Colonel Trevanion, who is nearly blind! You do not understand Ursula: she is a perfect saint: she is the simplest, most unselfish, grandest-hearted creature; and you make out that she is a silly flirt like Sara." And then I had to hold my tongue, though I was as red as a turkey-cock, for there was Mr. Hamilton staring at us both, and asking if I were in my senses, and why I was quarrelling about my cousin, for of course my voice was as gruff and cross as possible.'

'Oh, Jill!' I exclaimed, much distressed, 'how could you say such absurd things?—you know I never like you to talk in this exaggerated fashion. A saint, indeed! A pretty sort of saint Mr. Hamilton must think me!' for it nettled me to think that he had ever heard Jill's ridiculous nonsense.

'Wait a moment, till I have finished: you are not too saintly to be cross sometimes. I will tell him that, if you like. Well, when he said this about quarrelling, Miss Darrell gave him one of her sweet smiles.

'"Nonsense, Giles, as though I mind what this dear foolish child says; she is indulging in a panegyric on her cousin's virtues, because I said she was a little masculine and strong-minded and rather looked down upon us poor women. I have pressed her over and over again to spend an evening with us, but she always puts us off. I am afraid we Gladwyn ladies are not to her taste."

'"Don't be silly, Etta. Have I not told you poor old Elspeth is dying?—Miss Garston will not leave her, you may be sure of that." And then Mr. Hamilton said to me in quite a nice way,—oh, I did not dislike him so much that evening,—"I daresay you misunderstand Etta. I assure you we all think most highly of your cousin, and she will always be a welcome guest here, and I hope you will induce her to come soon." Wasn't it nice of him? Dear Etta did not dare to say another word.'

'Very nice, Jill; but indeed I do not want to hear any more of Miss Darrell's speeches.' And I got up hastily and opened the piano to put a stop to the conversation. Jill was always pleased when I would sing to her, but somehow my voice was not quite in order that evening.

The next day Jill surprised me very much by asking me if I knew that Miss Hamilton was going to Bournemouth for the rest of the winter.

'Mrs. Maberley has invited her, and Mr. Hamilton thinks it will do her so much good: they are going early next week. She wants to see you, Ursula; she says you have not met since Christmas. Could you go this afternoon? Miss Darrell will be out.'

I considered for a moment, and then said yes, I would certainly go up to Gladwyn. It made me feel a little dull to think Miss Hamilton was going away; we had not exchanged a word since that Sunday evening, but I had thought of her so much since then. My patients had engrossed my time, but hardly my thoughts. Poor Elspeth was slowly dying, and I had to be constantly with her. Marshall had not yet resumed work, but he was in poor spirits from the loss of his wife, and could hardly be a comfort to the poor creature. I put off my visit to Phœbe until the evening, and walked up to Gladwyn with Jill; she and Lady Betty were going for a walk, and were to have tea with the Maberleys. I learned afterwards that Mr. Tudor met them quite accidentally about three miles from Heathfield, and had accompanied them to Maplehurst, where he made himself so pleasant to the old lady that he was pressed to remain. Oh, Mr. Tudor, I am afraid you are not quite so artless as you look! I began to wish Aunt Philippa would soon recall Jill.

I found Miss Hamilton alone, and she seemed very glad to see me; her fair face quite flushed with pleasure when she saw me enter the drawing-room.

'I was afraid it was some stupid visitor,' she said frankly, 'when I heard the door-bell ring. Did it trouble you to come? How tired you look! there, you shall take Giles's chair,' putting me with gentle force in a big blue-velvet chair that always stood by the fire; and then she took off my wraps and unfastened my gloves, and made me feel how glad she was to wait on me.

'You are going away,' I said, rather lugubriously, for I felt all at once how I should miss her. She looked a little better and brighter, I thought, or was it only temporary excitement?

'Yes,' she returned seriously, but not sadly, 'I think it will be better. I am almost glad to go away, except that I shall not see you,' looking at me affectionately.

'Oh, if you wish to go,' for I was so relieved to hear her say this.

'It is not that I wish it, exactly, but that I feel it will be better: things are so uncomfortable just now, more than usual,

I think. Etta seems always worrying herself and me; sometimes I fancy that she wants to get rid of me, that I am too troublesome,' with a faint smile. 'She worries about my health and want of spirits. I suppose I am rather a depressing element in the house, and, as I get rather tired of all this fuss, I think it will be better to leave it behind for a little.'

'That sounds as though you were driven away from home, Miss Hamilton.'

'Miss Hamilton!' reproachfully; 'that is naughty, Ursula. I do not call you Miss Garston.'

'Gladys, then.'

'Perhaps my restlessness is driving me away,' she returned sadly. 'I do feel so restless without my work. I never minded Etta's fussiness so much. I daresay she means it kindly, but it harasses me. I am one of those reserved people who do not find it easy to talk of their feelings, bodily or mental, except to a chosen few. You are one,—perhaps not the only one.'

'Of course not,' for she hesitated. 'You do not suppose that I laid such flattering unction to my soul?'

'Oh, but I could tell you anything,' she returned seriously. 'You seem to draw out one's thoughts while one is thinking them. Yes, I am sorry to leave you even for a few weeks; but, for many reasons, Giles is right, and the change will be good for me.'

'If you will only come back looking better and brighter I will gladly let you go.'

'I do not promise you that,' she answered quickly, 'unless you remove the pressure of a very heavy burden; but I shall be quieter and more at peace, and I am very fond of Colonel and Mrs. Maberley: they are dear people, and they spoil me dreadfully.'

'I am thankful some one spoils you, Gladys.'

She smiled at that.

'Uncle Max is still away,' I observed, after a brief silence. 'He went to Torquay to see an invalid friend, and he is still there. Mr. Tudor does not expect him back until the end of next week.'

'Yes, I know,' she returned, in a low voice; 'but we shall be at Bournemouth before then. Will you bid him good-bye for me, Ursula, and say that I hope his visit has rested and refreshed him? He was not very well, you told me.'

'No, but he is better now: he writes very cheerfully.

Gladys, when you come back you will be stronger, I hope. I really do hope you will resume your work then; it will be far better for you to do so.'

'You cannot judge,' she said gently. 'I am afraid that I shall be unable to do that.' And somehow her manner closed the subject; but I was determined to make her speak on another subject.

'I want to tell you something that I think you ought to know,' I began, rather abruptly. 'Mrs. Maberley spoke to me about your brother Eric.'

'Ursula!'

'I could not let you go away and not know this: it did not seem honest. It has troubled me a great deal. Mrs. Maberley would tell me, and she told it so nicely; and Mr. Hamilton is aware that I know, and I am afraid he is not pleased about it.'

She put up her hands to her face for a moment, with a gesture full of distress.

'I meant to tell you myself,' she said, in a stifled voice, 'but not now; not until I felt stronger.'

'And now you will not have that pain, Gladys. I think you ought to be relieved that some one else has told me.' But she shook her head.

'How do I know what they said? And Giles is aware of it, you say. Oh, Ursula, for pity's sake, tell me, has he talked to you about Eric?'

'No, no, not in the way you mean: he only said that we must not judge or misjudge other people. He seemed afraid that I should misjudge him.'

'Oh, I am thankful to know that. I could not bear to have the poor boy discussed between you two. Giles would have made you believe everything, he has such a way with him, and you would not know any better. Oh, Ursula,' in a piteous voice, 'you must not listen to them; they are all so hard on my poor darling. Faulty as he was, he was innocent of the crime laid to his charge; they have accused him falsely. Eric never took that cheque.'

I could see she was strongly agitated. Her delicate throat swelled with emotion, and she took hold of my hands and held them tightly, and her large blue-gray eyes were fixed on my face with such a beseeching expression that I could have promised to believe anything. And yet she was right. Mr. Hamilton had a way with him that influenced people strongly; he could

speak with a power and authority that seemed to dominate one in spite of one's self. It has always appeared to me that we poor women are easily silenced and subjugated by a strong masculine will. It is difficult to assert a timid individuality in the presence of a regnant force.

I answered her as gently as I could. 'Dear Gladys, you will make yourself ill. Will it give you any relief to speak out? I will listen to anything you have to say.'

She drew a deep breath, and the colour ebbed back into her face.

'Perhaps it may be a relief: I am weary of silence,—of trying to bear it alone; and other things are wearing me out. Etta is not so far wrong, after all.' And then she stopped, and looked at me wistfully, and her lips trembled. 'Ursula, you are a nurse; you go about comforting sick bodies and sick minds. If I am ill,—one must be ill sometimes,—will you promise to come and take care of me, in spite of all Etta may do or say?'

I hesitated for a moment, for it seemed to me impossible to give an unconditional promise, but she continued reproachfully, 'You cannot have the heart to refuse! I wanted to ask you this before. You would not, surely, leave me to eat out my heart in this loneliness! If you knew what it is to have Etta with one at such times! an east wind would be more merciful and comforting. I know I am expressing myself far too strongly, but all this excites me. Do promise me this, Ursula. Giles will not hinder you coming: he appreciates you thoroughly: it will only be Etta who may try to oppose you.'

Gladys was right; I had not the heart to refuse: so I gave her the required promise, and she grew calmed at once.

'Now that is settled, I can breathe more freely,' she said presently. 'I am afraid I am growing fanciful, but lately I have had such a horror of being ill. Giles would be kind, I know,—he is always kind in illness,—but he lets Etta influence him. Ursula, she influenced him and turned him against my poor boy; with all Giles's faults,—and he can be very hard and stern and unforgiving,—I am sure that of his own accord he would never have been so harsh to Eric.'

'But Mrs. Maberley told me that Miss Darrell took your brother Eric's part.'

'Yes, I know, she believes in Etta, and so does Giles; but she is not true; she has a dangerous way of implying blame when she is apparently praising a person: have you never

noticed this? Giles was always more angry with Eric after Etta had been into the study to intercede for him. If she would only have let him alone; but that is not Etta's way: she must make or mar people's lives.'

There was a concentrated bitterness in Gladys's voice, and her face grew stern.

'There was no love between them. Eric detested Etta, and on her side I know she disliked him. Eric never would tell me the reason; he was always hinting that he had found her out, and that she knew it, and that in consequence she wanted to get rid of him; but I thought it was all fancy on the poor boy's part, and I used to laugh at him. I wish I had not laughed now, for there was doubtless truth in what he said.'

'You were very fond of him, Gladys?' I asked softly, and as I spoke her face changed, and its expression grew soft and loving in a moment.

'Love him? he was everything to me: he was my twin, you know,—and so beautiful. Oh, I never saw a man's face so beautiful as his; he had such bright ways, too, and such a ringing laugh,—I wake up sometimes and fancy I hear it; and then came his whistle and light footstep springing up the stairs; but it is only a part of my dream.' She sighed, and went on: 'He was so fond of me, and used to tell me everything, and he was never cross to me, however put out and miserable he was; and I know they made him very miserable. Giles was so strict with him, and would not give him any liberty, and when Eric rebelled he was cruel to him.'

'Oh, not cruel, surely!' I could not help the involuntary exclamation. I thought Gladys looked at me a little strangely before she answered:

'It seemed cruel to us; he was very harsh,—oh, terribly harsh; but I think—nay, I am sure—he has repented of his hardness. I was slow to forgive him: perhaps it would be more true to say I have not wholly forgiven him yet; but I know now that he has suffered, that he would undo a great deal of the past if he could, and this makes me more merciful. Sometimes in my heart I feel quite sorry for Giles.'

CHAPTER XXIII

THE MYSTERY AT GLADWYN

JUST then Leah entered the room to replenish the fire, and Gladys dropped my hand hastily and took up a screen.

'When my brother comes in we will have tea, Leah,' she said quickly. 'Where is Thornton, that he does not come in to do this?'

'I was passing through the hall, and I thought I would have a look at the fire, ma'am,' observed Leah, as she stooped to throw on a log. As she did so, I saw her take a furtive look at us both,—it gave me an unpleasant feeling,—and a moment afterwards she said in a soft, civil voice,—

'There is no reason why Thornton should not bring tea now, if you like, ma'am. Master never cares to be waited for, and most likely he will be late this afternoon. I can walk home with Miss Garston when she is ready. I am sure my mistress would spare me.'

'We will see about that presently, Leah: when I want Thornton I will ring for him.' Gladys spoke somewhat haughtily, and Leah left the room without another word; but I was sorry and troubled in my very heart to see Gladys motion me to be silent, and then go quickly to the door and open it and stand there for a moment. Her colour was a little heightened when she came back to her seat.

'She has gone now, but we must be careful and not speak loudly. I hate myself for being so suspicious, but I have found out that some of our conversations have been retailed to Etta. I am afraid Leah listens at the door. She came in just now to interrupt our talk: it is Thornton's place to put coals on the drawing-room fire.'

I felt an uncomfortable sensation creeping over me.

'Do you think she even heard us just now?'

'I fear so; and now Etta will know we have been talking about Eric. Oh, I am glad I am going away! it gets too unbearable. Ursula, I shall write to you, and you must answer me. Think what a comfort your letters will be to me; I shall be able to depend on what you say. Lady Betty is so careless, she knows what Etta is, and yet she will leave her letters about, and more than once they have not reached me. I am afraid that Leah is a little unscrupulous in such matters.'

I was aghast as I listened to her, but she changed the subject quickly.

'What were we talking about? Oh, I said Giles was hard; and so he was; but Eric was faulty too.

'He was very idle; he would not work, and he thought of nothing but his painting. Giles always says I encouraged him in his idleness; but this is hardly the truth. I used to try and coax him to open his books, but he had got this craze for painting, and he spent hours at his easel. I thought it was a great pity that Giles forced him to take up law; if he had talent it was surely better for him to be an artist; but Giles and Etta persisted in ignoring his talent. They called his pictures daubs, and ridiculed his artistic notions.'

'Do you really believe that he would have worked successfully as an artist?'

'It is difficult for me to judge. Eric was so young, and had had little training, and then he only painted in a desultory way: as I have told you, he was very idle. I think if Giles had been more fatherly with him, and had remonstrated with him more gently, and showed him the sense and fitness of things, Eric would have been reasonable; but Etta made so much mischief between them that things only got worse and worse. Eric was extravagant; he never managed money well, and he got into debt, and that made Giles furious, and when Eric lost his temper—for he was very hot and soon got into a passion—Giles's coolness and hard sneering speeches nearly drove Eric wild. He came to me one day in the garden looking as white as a sheet,—that was the day before the cheque was missed,—and told me, in a conscience-stricken voice, that it was all up between him and Giles, he had got into a passion and struck Giles across the face.

'"I don't know why he did not knock me down," cried the

poor lad. "I deserved it, for I saw him wince with the pain; but he only took me by the shoulder—you know how strong Giles is—and turned me out of the room without saying a word, and there was the mark of my hand across his cheek. I feel like Cain, I do indeed, Gladys, 'For he that hateth his brother is a murderer'; and I hate Giles."' And the poor boy—he was only twenty, Ursula—put his head down on my shoulder and sobbed like a child. If only Giles could have seen him then!'

'Do you know what passed between them?'

'Yes; I heard a little from both of them. Some of Eric's bills had been opened accidentally by Giles. Etta had told Giles that they were his, and he had called Eric to account. And then it seems that Eric's affairs were mixed up with another young man's, Edgar Brown, a very wild young fellow, with whom Giles had forbidden Eric to associate. They had been school-fellows, and Giles knew his father, Dr. Brown, and disliked him much; and it seems that Eric had promised to break with him, and had not kept his promise; and when Giles called him mean and dishonourable, Eric had forgotten himself, and struck Giles.

'"It is all over between us, I tell you, Gladys," the poor boy kept saying. "Giles says he shall take me away from Oxford, and I am to be put in an attorney's office: he declares I shall ruin him. I cannot stop here to be tormented and bullied, and I will never go near old Armstrong: why, the life would be worse than a convict's. I shall just go and enlist, and then there is a chance of getting rid of this miserable life." But I did not take much notice of this speech, for I knew Eric had no wish to enter the army; and certainly he would never do such a rash thing as enlist: he always declared he would as soon be a shoeblack. What does that look mean, Ursula?' for I was glancing uneasily at the door. Was it my fancy, or did I really hear the faint rustle of a dress on the tessellated pavement of the hall? In another moment Gladys understood, and her voice dropped into a whisper.

'Come closer to me. I mean to tell you all in spite of them. I will be as quick as I can, or Giles will be here.

'I never saw Eric in such a state as he was that day. He seemed nearly beside himself: nothing I could say seemed to give him any comfort. He shut himself up in his room and refused to eat. He would not admit me for a long time, but

when he at last opened the door I saw that his table was strewn with papers, and a letter directed to Giles lay beside them.

'We sat down and had a long talk. He told me that he had got into more difficulties than even Giles suspected. He had been led away by Edgar Brown. I brought him all the money I had, which was little enough, and promised him my next quarter's allowance. I remember he spoke again of enlisting, and said that any life, however hard, would be preferable to the present one. He could not stay here and be slandered by Etta and bullied by Giles. He seemed very unhappy, and once he put down his head upon his arms and groaned. It was just then that I heard a slight movement outside the door, and opened it just in time to see Leah gliding round the corner. Ursula, she had heard every word that my poor boy had said, and it is Leah's evidence that has helped to criminate him.'

'Yes, I see. But did you not put your brother on his guard?'

'No,' she returned sadly, 'I made the grievous mistake of keeping Leah's eavesdropping to myself. I thought Eric had enough to trouble him, without adding to his discomfort. I would give much now to have done otherwise.

'I stayed up late with him, and did not leave him until he had promised to go to bed. Giles was still in the study when I went to my room, but he came up shortly afterwards, for I could hear his footsteps distinctly passing my door. He must have passed Leah in the passage, for I heard him say, "You are up late to-night, Leah," but her answer escaped me.

'I can tell you no more on my own evidence; but Eric's account, which I believe as surely as I am holding your hand now, is this:

'He heard Giles come up to bed, and a sudden impulse prompted him to go down to the study and place his letter on Giles's desk. It was a very wild, foolish letter, written under strong excitement. I saw it afterwards, and felt that it had better not have been written. Among other things, he informed Giles that he would sooner destroy himself than go into Armstrong's office, and that he (Giles) had made his life so bitter to him that he thought he might as well do it: oh, Ursula, of course it was wrong of him, but indeed he had had terrible provocation. He had made up his mind to put this letter on Giles's desk before he slept: so he slipped off his boots, that I might not hear him pass my door, and crept down to the study. He had his chamber candlestick, as he feared that he might

have some difficulty with the fastenings, for he had heard Giles put up the chain and bell. All our doors on that floor have chains and bells; it is one of Giles's fads. To his great surprise, the door was ajar, and when he put down the candle on the table he had a passing fancy that the thick curtains that were drawn over one of the windows moved slightly, as though from a draught of air. He blamed himself afterwards that he had not gone up to the window and examined it, but in his perturbed mood he did not take much notice; but he was certainly startled when he turned round to see Leah, in her dark dressing-gown, standing in the threshold watching him with a queer look in her eyes. There was something in her expression that made him feel uneasy.

'"I thought it was thieves," she said, and now she looked not at him, but across at the curtain. "What are you doing with master's papers, Mr. Eric?"

'"Mind your own business," returned Eric sulkily: "do you think I am going to account to you for my actions?" And he took up his candlestick and marched off.'

'And he left that woman in possession?'

'Yes,' returned Gladys in a peculiar tone, and then she hurried on: 'The next morning Giles missed a cheque for a large amount that he had received the previous night and placed in one of the compartments of his desk, and in its place he found Eric's letter. Do you notice the discrepancy here? Eric vowed to me that he had placed the letter on the desk, that he never dreamt of opening it, that he always believed Giles kept it locked, that if Giles had been careless and left the key in it he knew nothing about it. His business to the study was to put his letter where Giles would be likely to find it on entering the room. Ursula, how did that letter get into the desk?

'We were all summoned to the study when the cheque was missed. Etta fetched me. She said very little, and looked unusually pale. Giles was in a terrible state of anger, she informed me, and Leah was speaking to him.

'Alas! she had been speaking to some purpose. I found Eric almost dumb with fury. Giles had refused to believe his assertion of innocence, and he had no proof. Leah's statement had been overwhelming, and bore the outward stamp of veracity.

'She told her master that, thinking she heard a noise, and being fearful of thieves, she had crept down in her dressing-gown to the study, and, to her horror, had seen Mr. Eric with

his hand in his brother's desk, and she could take her oath that he put some paper or other in his pocket. She had not liked to disturb her master, not knowing that there was money in the case.

'Ursula, I cannot tell you any more that passed. That woman had effectually blackened my poor boy's honour. No one believed his word, though he swore that he was innocent. I heard high words pass between the brothers. I know Giles called Eric a liar and a thief, and Eric rushed at him like a madman, and then I fainted. When I recovered I found Lady Betty crying over me and Leah rubbing my hands. No one else was there. Eric had dashed up to his room, and Giles and Etta were in the drawing-room. I told Leah to go out of my sight, for I hated her; and I felt I did hate her. And when she left us alone I managed, with Lady Betty's help, to crawl up to Eric's room. But, though we heard him raging about it, he would not admit us. So I went and lay down on my bed and slept from sheer grief and exhaustion.

'When I woke from that stupor,—for it was more stupor than sleep,—it was late in the afternoon. I shall always believe the wine Leah gave me was drugged. How I wish I had dashed the glass away from my lips! But I was weak, and she had compelled me to drink it.

'Lady Betty was still sitting by me. She seemed half frightened by my long sleep. She said Eric had come in and had kissed me, but very lightly, so as not to disturb me. And she thought there were tears in his eyes as he went out. Ursula, I have never seen him since. He left the house almost immediately afterwards, but no one saw him go. By some strange oversight Giles's telegram to the London Bank to stop the cheque did not reach them in time. And yet Etta went herself to the telegraph-office. As you may have perhaps heard, a tall fair young man, with a light moustache, cashed the cheque early in the afternoon. Yes, I know, Ursula, the circumstantial evidence is rather strong just here. I am quite aware that it was possible for Eric after leaving our house to be in London at the time mentioned, but no one can prove that it was Eric.

'Edgar Brown is tall and fair, and there are plenty of young men answering to that description; and I maintain, and shall maintain to my dying day,—and I am sure Mr. Cunliffe agrees with me,—that it was not Eric who presented that cheque. The clerk told Giles that the young man had a scar across his cheek

and a slight cut, though he was decidedly good-looking. But Giles refused to believe this. He says the clerk made a mistake about the last.

'The next morning I received a letter from Eric, written at the Ship Hotel, Brighton, containing the exact particulars that I have given, and reiterating in the most solemn way that he was perfectly innocent of the shameful crime laid to his charge.

'"You will believe me, Gladys, I know," he went on. "You will not let my enemies blacken my memory if you can help it. If I could only be on the spot to clear up the mystery; for there is a mystery about the cheque. But I have sworn never to cross the threshold of Gladwyn again until this insult is wiped out and Giles believes in my innocence. If we never meet again, my sweet sister, you will know I loved you as well as I could love anything; but I was never good and unselfish like you. And I fear—I greatly fear—that I shall never weather through this." That was all. The letter ended abruptly.

'The following afternoon a messenger from the Ship asked to see Mr. Hamilton; and after Giles had been closeted with him for a few minutes he came out, looking white and scared, with Eric's watch and scarf in his hands. The man had told him the young gentleman had gone out and had not returned, and they had been found on the beach, at the extreme end of Hove, and they feared something had happened to him. He had ordered dinner at a certain time, but he had not made his appearance. The next morning they had heard reports in the town that caused them to institute inquiries. A letter in the pocket of the coat, directed to Eric Hamilton, Gladwyn, Heathfield, enabled them to communicate with his relatives. And they had lost no time in doing so. I never saw Giles so terribly upset. He looked as though he had received a blow. He went to Brighton at once, and afterwards to London, and employed every means to set our fears at rest, for a horrible suspicion that he had really made away with himself was in all our minds.

'I was far too ill to notice all that went on. A fever seemed about me, and I could not eat or sleep. I think I should have done neither, that my poor brain must have given way under the shock of my apprehensions, but for Mr. Cunliffe.

'He was a true friend,—a good Samaritan. He bound up my wounds and poured in oil and wine of divinest charity. He did not believe that Eric was guilty of either dishonesty or

self-destruction. In his own mind he was inclined to believe that he wished us to think him dead. It was all a mystery; but we must wait and pray; and in time he managed to instil a faint hope into my mind that this might be so.

'Etta was rather kind to me just then. She looked ill and worried, and seemed taken up with Giles. It was well that he should have some one to look after his comforts, for there was a breach between us that seemed as though it would never be healed. I saw that he was irritable and miserable,—that the thought of Eric robbed him of all peace. But I could make no effort to console him, for I felt as though my heart was breaking. I——' And here she hid her face in her hands, and I could see she was weeping, and I begged her earnestly to say no more, that I quite understood, and she might be sure of my sympathy with her and Eric. She kissed me gratefully, and said, 'Yes, I know. I am glad to have told you all this. Now you understand why I am so grateful to Mr. Cunliffe, why I am so sorry'—and here her lips quivered —'if I disappoint him. I feel as though he has given me back Eric from the dead. It is true I doubt sometimes, when I am ill or gloomy, but generally my faith is strong enough to withstand Etta's incredulity.'

'Does Miss Darrell believe that he is dead?'

'Yes; and she is so angry if any one doubts the fact. I don't know why she hates the poor boy so: even Mr. Cunliffe has reproved her for her want of charity. I think she fears Mr. Cunliffe more than any one, even Giles: she is always so careful what she says before him.'

'Gladys, I think I hear your brother's voice in the hall, and your cheeks are quite wet: he will wonder what we have been talking about.'

'I will ring for Thornton, and the tea: he shall find me clearing the table. Don't offer to help me, Ursula.' And I sat still obediently, watching her slow, graceful movements about the room in the firelight: her fair hair shone like a halo of gold, and the dark ruby gown she wore gathered richer and deeper tints. That beautiful, sad face, how I should miss it!

It was some little time before Mr. Hamilton entered the room. Thornton had lighted the candles and arranged the tea-tray, and Gladys had placed herself at the table.

He testified no surprise at seeing me, but walked to the fire, after greeting me, and warmed himself.

'They told me you were here,' he said abruptly: 'I was at the cottage just now. Have you not had your tea? Why, it is quite late, Gladys, and I want to take Miss Garston away.'

'Is there anything the matter, Mr. Hamilton?' for I was beginning to understand his manner better now.

'Oh, I have some business for you, that is all,—another patient; but I will not tell you about it yet: you must have a good meal before you go out into the cold. I shall ring the bell for some more bread-and-butter; I know you dined early; and this hot cake will do you no good.' And, as I saw he meant to be obeyed, I tried to do justice to the delicious brown bread and butter; but our conversation had taken away my appetite.

He stood over me rather like a sentinel until I had finished.

'Now, then, I may as well tell you. Susan Locke is ill,—acute pneumonia. I have just been down to see her, and I am afraid it is a sharp attack. Well, if you are ready, we may as well be going; the neighbour who is with her seems a poor sort of body. They sent for you, but Mrs. Barton said you were with Elspeth, and when Kitty went there you were nowhere to be found.'

CHAPTER XXIV

WEEPING MAY ENDURE FOR A NIGHT

I COULD not suppress an exclamation when Mr. Hamilton mentioned the name.

Susan Locke! Poor, simple, loving-hearted Susan! What would become of Phœbe if she died?

Mr. Hamilton seemed to read my thoughts.

'Yes,' he said, looking at me attentively, 'I knew you would be sorry; Miss Locke was a great favourite of yours. Poor woman! it is a sad business. I am afraid she is very ill: they ought to have sent for me before. Now, if you are ready, we will start at once.'

'I will not keep you another minute. Good-bye, Ursula.' And Gladys kissed me, and quietly followed us to the door. It was snowing fast, and the ground was already white with the fallen flakes. Mr. Hamilton put up his umbrella, and stood waiting for me under the shrubs, but a sudden impulse made me linger.

Gladys was still standing in the porch; her fair hair shone like a halo in the soft lamplight, her eyes were fixed on the falling snow. I had said good-bye to her so hastily: I ran back, and kissed her again.

'I wish you were not going, Gladys; I shall miss you so.'

'It is nice to hear that,' she returned gently. 'I shall remember those words, Ursula. Write to me often; your letters will be my only comfort. There, Giles is looking impatient; do not keep him waiting, dear.' And she drew back, and a moment afterwards I heard the door shut behind us.

Mr. Hamilton did not speak as I joined him, and I thought

that our walk would be a silent one, until he said presently, in rather a peculiar tone,—

'Well, Miss Garston, I suppose I ought to congratulate you for succeeding where I have failed.' Of course I knew what he meant, but I pretended to misunderstand him, and he went on,—

'You have won my sister's heart. Gladys cares for few people, but she seems very fond of you.'

'The feeling is reciprocated, I can assure you.'

'I am glad to know that,' he returned heartily. 'I only wish you could teach Gladys to be like other girls; she is too young and too pretty to take such grave views of life; it is unnatural at her age. One disappointment, however bitter, ought not to cloud her whole existence. Try to make her see things in a more reasonable light. Gladys is as good as gold. Of course I know that she is a fine creature; but it is not like a Christian to mourn over the inevitable in this undisciplined way.'

He spoke with great feeling, and with a gentleness that surprised me. I felt sure then of his affection for his young sister; I wished Gladys could have heard him speak in this fatherly manner. But, in spite of my sympathy, it was difficult for me to answer him. I felt that this was a subject that I could not discuss with Mr. Hamilton, and yet he seemed to wish me to speak.

'You must give her time to recover herself,' I said, rather lamely. 'Gladys is very sensitive; she is more delicately organised than most people; her feelings are unusually deep. She has had a severe shock; it will not be easy to comfort her.'

'No, I suppose not,' with a sigh; 'her faith has suffered shipwreck; but you must try to win her back to peace. Oh, you have much to do at Gladwyn, as well as other places. I want you to feel at home with us, Miss Garston. Some of us have our faults, we want knowing; but you must try and like us better, and then you will not find us ungrateful.'

He stopped rather abruptly, as though he expected an answer, but I only stammered out that he was very kind, and that I hoped when Gladys returned from Bournemouth that I should often see her.

'Oh, to be sure,' he returned hastily. 'I forgot that her absence would make a difference. You do not like poor Etta: I have noticed that. Well, perhaps she is a little fussy and managing; but she is a kind-hearted creature, and very good

to us all. I do not know what I should have done without her; my sisters do not understand me, they are never at their ease with me. I feel this a trouble; I want to be good to them; but there always seems a barrier that one cannot break down. I suppose,' with intense bitterness, 'they lay the blame of that poor boy's death at my door, as though I would not give my right hand to have him back again.'

'Oh no, Mr. Hamilton,' I exclaimed, shocked to hear him speak in this way, 'things are not so bad as that. I know Gladys would be more to you if she could.' But he turned upon me almost fiercely.

'Do not tell me that,' he said harshly, 'for I cannot believe you. Gladys cared more for Eric's little finger than the whole of us put together; she looks upon me as his destroyer, as a hard taskmaster who oppressed him and drove him out of his home. Oh, you want to contradict me; you would tell me how gentle Gladys is, and how submissive. No, she is never angry, but her looks and words are cold as this frozen snow; she has not kissed me of her own accord since Eric left us. I sometimes think it is painful for her to live under my roof.'

'Mr. Hamilton!'

'Well, what now?' in the same repellent tone.

'You are wrong; you are unjust. Gladys does not feel like that; she has tried to forgive you in her heart for any past mistake; she sees you regret much that has passed, and she is no longer bitter against you. I wish you would believe this. I wish you could understand that she, too, longs to break down the barrier. Perhaps I ought not to say it, but I think Miss Darrell keeps you apart from your sisters.'

'What, Etta!' in an astonished tone. 'Why, she is always making excuses for Gladys's coldness. Come, Miss Garston, I cannot have you misunderstand my poor little cousin in this way. You have no idea how faithful and devoted she is. She has actually refused a most advantageous offer of marriage to remain with us. She told me this in confidence; the girls do not know it: perhaps I ought not to have repeated it; but you undervalue Etta. Few women would sacrifice themselves so entirely for their belongings.'

'No, indeed,' was my reply to this; but I secretly marvelled at this piece of intelligence, and there was no time to ask any questions, for we had reached the cottage, and the next minute I was standing by Susan Locke's bedside.

There was no need to tell me that poor Susan was in danger; the inflammation ran high; the flushed face, the difficult breathing, the strength and fulness of the rapid pulse, filled me with grave forebodings. Mr. Hamilton remained with me some time, and when he took his leave he promised to come again as early as possible in the morning.

'I will stay altogether if you wish it,' he said kindly, 'if you feel the least uneasiness at being alone.' But I disclaimed all fear on this score. I only begged him to remain with the patient a few minutes while I spoke to Phœbe, and he agreed to this.

It was late; but I knew she would not be asleep. How could she sleep, poor soul, with this fresh stroke threatening her? As I opened the door I heard her calling to me in a voice broken with sobs.

'Oh, Miss Garston, I have been longing for you to come to me; you have been here for hours. I have been lying listening to your footsteps overhead. Do you know, the suspense is killing me?'

'Yes, I am so sorry for you, Phœbe: it is hard to bear, is it not? But I could not leave your sister. We are doing all we can to ease her sufferings, but she is very very ill.'

'Do you think that I do not know that? She is dying! my only sister is dying!' And here her tears burst out again. 'Ah, Miss Garston, those dreadful words are coming true, after all.'

'What words, my poor Phœbe?' And I knelt down by her side and smoothed the hair from her damp forehead.

'Oh, you know what I mean. I have repeated them before; they haunt me day and night, and you refused to take them back. "If we will not lie still under His hand, and learn the lesson He would teach us, fresh trials may be sent to humble us,"—fresh trials; and, oh, my God, Susan is dying!'

'You must not say that to her nurse, Phœbe; you must try and strengthen my hands: indeed, all hope is not lost: the inflammation is very high, but who knows if your prayers may not save her?'

'My prayers! my prayers!' covering her face while the tears trickled through her wasted fingers; 'as though God would listen to me who have been a rebel all my life.'

'Ah, but you are not rebellious now: you have fought against Him all these years, but now all His waves and billows have gone over your head, and you cannot breast them alone.'

'No, and I have deserved it all. I do try to pray, Miss Garston, I do indeed, but the words will not come. I can only say over and over again, "Father, I have sinned against heaven and before thee," and then I stop and my heart seems breaking.'

'Well, and what can be better than that cry of your poor despairing heart to your Father! Do you think that He will not have pity on His suffering child? Be generous in your penitence, Phœbe, and trust yourself and Susan in His hands.'

'Ah, but you do not know all,' she continued, fixing her miserable eyes on me. 'I have not been good to Susan: I have let her sacrifice her life for me, and have taken it all as a matter of course. I made her bear all my bad tempers and never gave her a good word. She was too tired,—ah, she was often tired,—and then she took this chill, and I made her wait on me all the same. She told me she was ill and in great pain, and I kept her standing for a long time; and I would not bid her good-night when she went away; and I heard her sigh as she closed the door, and I called her back and she did not hear me; and now——' But here hysterical sobs checked her utterance.

'Yes, but you are sorry now, and Susan has forgiven you. I think she wanted to send you a message, but she is in too great pain to speak. I heard her say, "Poor Phœbe," but I begged her not to make the effort; you see she is thinking of you still.'

'My poor Susan! But she must not miss you; I am wicked and selfish to keep you like this. Go to her, Miss Garston!' And I was thankful to be dismissed.

My heart was full when I re-entered the sick-room. Mr. Hamilton looked rather scrutinising as he rose to give me his place.

'Your thoughts must be here,' he said meaningly. 'Forgive me, if I give you that hint: do not forget Providence is watching over that other room. One duty at a time, Miss Garston.' And, though I coloured at this wholesome rebuke, I knew he was correct.

'Yes, he is right,' I thought, as I stood listening to poor Susan's oppressed and difficult breathing: 'the Divine Teacher is beside His child. It is not for us to question this discipline or plead for an easier lesson.' But none the less did the fervent petition rise from my heart that the angel of death might not be suffered to enter this house.

The night wore on, but, alas! there was no improvement.

When Mr. Hamilton came through the snow the next morning he looked grave and dissatisfied, and then he asked me if I wanted any help; but I shook my head. 'Mrs. Martin is in the house: she will look after Phœbe and Kitty.'

When he had gone, I wrote a little note and gave it to Kitty: 'I cannot leave Susan for a minute, she is so very ill. Mr. Hamilton can see no improvement. He is coming again at mid-day. She suffers very much; but we will not give up hope, you and I'; and I bade Kitty carry it to her aunt.

When Mr. Hamilton returned, he brought a little covered basket with him, and bade me rather peremptorily take my luncheon while he watched beside the patient.

This act of thoughtfulness touched me. I wondered who had packed the basket: there was the wing of a chicken, some delicate slices of tongue, a roll, and some jelly. A little note lay at the bottom:

'Giles has asked me to provide a tempting luncheon: he says you have had a sad night with poor Miss Locke, and are looking very tired. Poor Ursula! you are spending all your strength on other people.

'In another half-hour I shall leave Gladwyn. I think I am glad to go, things are so miserable here, and one loses patience sometimes. I wish I could know poor Susan Locke's fate before I go; but Giles seems to have little hope. Take care of yourself for my sake, Ursula. I have grown to love you very dearly. —Your affectionate friend, GLADYS.'

Mr. Hamilton came again early in the evening, and I took the opportunity of paying Phœbe another visit.

She was lying with her eyes closed, and looked very ill and exhausted,—alarmingly so, I thought: her emotion had nearly spent itself, and she was now passive and waiting for the worst.

'Let me know when it happens,' she whispered. 'I have no hope now, but I will try and bear it.' And she drew my hands to her lips and kissed them: 'they have touched Susan, they are doing my work, they are blessed hands to me.' And then she seemed unable to bear more.

When Mr. Hamilton paid his final visit he announced his intention of remaining in the house. 'There will be a change one way or another before long, and I shall not leave you by yourself to-night,' he said quietly; and in my heart I was not

sorry to hear this. He told me that there was a good fire downstairs, and that he meant to take possession of a very comfortable arm-chair, but that he wanted to remain in the sick-room for half an hour or so.

I fancied that his professional eyes had already detected some change. Presently he walked away to the fireplace and stood looking down into the flames in rather an absent way.

I could not help looking at him once or twice, he seemed so absorbed in thought; his dark face looked rigid, his lips firmly closed, and his forehead slightly puckered.

More than once I had puzzled myself over a fancied resemblance of Mr. Hamilton to some picture I had seen. All at once I remembered the subject. It was the picture of a young Christian sleeping peacefully just before he was called to his combat with wild beasts in the amphitheatre: the keeper was even then opening the door: the lions were waiting for their prey. The face was boyish, but still Mr. Hamilton reminded me of him. And there was a picture of St. Augustine sitting with his mother Monica, that reminded me of Mr. Hamilton too. I had called him plain, and Jill thought him positively ugly, but, after all, there was something noble in his expression, a power that made itself felt.

Just then the lines of his face relaxed and softened; he half smiled, looked up, and our eyes met. I was terribly abashed at the thought that he should find me watching him; but, to my surprise, his face brightened, and he roused himself and crossed the room.

'I was dreaming, I think, but you woke me. Are you very tired? Shall I take your place?' But before I could reply his manner changed, and he stooped over the bed, and then looked at me with a smile.

'I thought so. The breathing is certainly less difficult: the inflammation is diminishing. I see signs of improvement.'

'Thank God!' was my answer to this, and before long this hope was verified: the pain and difficulty of breathing were certainly less intense, the danger was subsiding.

Mr. Hamilton went downstairs soon after this, and I settled to my solitary night-watch, but it was no longer dreary: every hour I felt more assured that Susan Locke would be restored to her sister.

Once or twice during the night I crept into Phœbe's room to gladden her heart with the glad news, but she was sleeping

heavily and I would not disturb her. 'Weeping may endure for a night, but joy cometh in the morning,' I said to myself, as I sat down by Susan's bedside. I was very weary, but a strange tumult of thoughts seemed surging through my brain, and I was unable to control them. Gladys's pale face and tear-filled eyes rose perpetually before me: her low, passionate tones vibrated in my ear. 'They have accused him falsely,' I seemed to hear her say: 'Eric never took that cheque.'

What a mystery in that quiet household! No wonder there was something unrestful in the atmosphere of Gladwyn,—that one felt oppressed and ill at ease in that house.

Fragments of my conversation with Mr. Hamilton came unbidden to my memory. How strange that that proud, reserved man should have spoken so to me, that he had suffered his heart's bitterness to overflow in words to me, who was almost a stranger: 'They lay the blame of that poor boy's death at my door, as though I would not give my right hand to have him back again.' Oh, if Gladys had only heard the tone in which he said this, she must have believed and have been sorry for him.

'They are too hard upon him,' I said to myself. 'If he has been stern and injudicious with his poor young brother, he has long ago repented of his hardness. He is very good to them all, but they will not try to understand him: it is not right of Gladys to treat him as a stranger. I am sorry for them all, but I begin to feel that Mr. Hamilton is not the only one to blame.'

I wished I could have told him this, but I knew the words would never get themselves spoken. I might be sorry for him in my heart, but I could never tell him so, never assure him of my true sympathy. I was far too much in awe of him: there are some men one would never venture to pity.

But all the same I longed to do him some secret service; he had been kind to me, and had helped me much in my work. If I could only succeed in bringing him and Gladys nearer together, if I could make them understand each other, I felt I would have spared no pains or trouble to do so.

If he were not so infatuated on the subject of his cousin's merits, I thought scornfully, I should be no more sanguine about my success; but Miss Darrell had hoodwinked him completely. As long as he believed in all she chose to tell him, Gladys would never be in her proper place.

As soon as it was light I heard Mr. Hamilton stirring in the

room below. He came up for a moment to tell me that he was going home to breakfast; he looked quite fresh and brisk, and declared that he had had a capital night's sleep.

'I am going to find some one to take your place while you go home and have a good seven hours' rest,' he said, in his decided way. 'I suppose you are aware that you have not slept for forty-eight hours? Kitty is going to make you some tea.' And with this he took himself off.

I went into Phœbe's room presently. Kitty told me that she was awake at last. As soon as she saw me she put up her hands as though to ward off my approach.

'Wait a moment,' she said huskily. 'You need not tell me; I know what you have come to say; I have no longer a sister: Susan is a saint in heaven.'

For a moment I hesitated, afraid to speak. She had nerved herself to bear the worst, and I feared the revulsion of feeling would be too great. As I stood there silently looking down at her drawn, haggard face, I felt she would not have had strength to bear a fresh trial. If Susan had died Phœbe would not have long survived her.

'You are wrong,' I said, very gently. 'I have no bad news for you this morning. The inflammation has diminished. Susan breathes more easily: each breath is no longer acute agony.'

'Do you mean that she is better?' staring at me incredulously.

'Most certainly she is better. The danger is over; but we must be very careful, for she will be ill for some time yet. Yes, indeed, Phœbe, you may believe me. Do you think I would deceive you? God has heard your prayers, and Susan is spared to you.'

I never saw a human countenance so transformed as Phœbe's was that moment; every feature seemed to quiver with ecstasy; she could not speak, only she folded her hands as though in prayer. Presently she looked up, and said, as simply as a child,—

'Oh, I am so happy! I never thought I should be happy again. You may leave me now, Miss Garston, for I want to thank God, for the first time in my life. I feel as though I must love Him now for giving Susan back to me.' And then again she begged me to leave her.

Mr. Hamilton did not forget me. I had just put the

sick-room in order when a respectable young woman made her appearance. She told me that her name was Carron, that she was a married woman and a friend of Miss Locke's, and she would willingly take my place until evening.

I was thankful to accept this timely offer of help, and went home and enjoyed a deep dreamless sleep for some hours. When I woke it was evening. Jill was standing by my bedside with a tray in her hands. The room was bright with firelight. Jill's big eyes looked at me affectionately.

'How you have slept, Ursie dear! just like a baby! I have been in and out half-a-dozen times; but no, you never stirred. I told Mr. Hamilton so, when he inquired an hour ago. Now, you are to drink this coffee, and when you are quite awake I will give you his message.'

'I am quite awake now,' I returned, rubbing my eyes vigorously.

'Well, then, let me see. Oh, Miss Locke is going on well, and Mrs. Carron will stop with her until eight o'clock. Phœbe has been ill, and they sent for him; but it was only faintness and palpitation, and she is better now. He has been to see Elspeth, and she is poorly; but there is no need for you to trouble about her. Miss Darrell is sending her broth and jelly, and Peggy waits on her very nicely. Lady Betty and I went to see her to-day, and she was as comfortable and cheery as possible, and told us that she felt like a lady in that big bed downstairs. Mr. Hamilton says she will not die just yet, but one of these days she will go off as quietly as a baby. She asked after you, Ursie, and sent you a power of love, and I hope it will do you good.'

'And what have you been doing with yourself all day, Jill?' I asked, rather anxiously.

'Oh, lots of things,' tossing back her thick locks. 'Let me see. Lady Betty came to fetch me for a walk, and we met Mr. Tudor. He is all alone, poor man, and very dull without Mr. Cunliffe; he told us so: so Lady Betty brought him back to lunch. And Miss Darrell was so cross, and told poor Lady Betty that she was very forward to do such a thing; they had such a quarrel in the drawing-room about it. Mr. Tudor came in and found Lady Betty crying, so he made us come out in the garden, and we played a new sort of Aunt Sally. Mr. Tudor stuck up an old hat of Mr. Hamilton's,—at least we found out it was not an old one after all,—and we snowballed it, and Mr.

Hamilton came out and helped us. After tea, we all told ghost-stories round the fire. Miss Darrell does not like them, so she went up to her room. Mr. Tudor had to see a sick man, but he came back to dinner; but I would not stay, for I thought you would be waking, Ursie, so Mr. Hamilton brought me home.'

'Jill!' I asked desperately, 'have they not written for you to join them at Hastings yet? I begin to think you have been idle long enough.'

'Had you not better go to sleep again, Ursie dear?' returned Jill, marching off with my tray. But she made a little face at me as she went out of the door. 'I shall get into trouble over this,' I thought. 'I really must write to Aunt Philippa.' But I was spared the necessity, for the very next day Jill came to me at Miss Locke's to tell me, with a very long face, that her mother had written to say that Miss Gillespie was coming the following week, and Jill was to pack up and join them at Hastings the very next day.

CHAPTER XXV

'THERE IS NO ONE LIKE DONALD'

MRS. CARRON very kindly took my place that I might be with Jill that last evening, and we spent it in Jill's favourite fashion, talking in the firelight.

She was a little quiet and subdued, full of regret at leaving me, and more affectionate than ever.

'I have never been so happy in my life,' she said, in rather a melancholy voice. 'When I get to Hastings, my visit here will seem like a dream, it has been so nice, somehow; you are such a dear old thing, Ursula, and I am so fond of Lady Betty, I shall ask mother to invite her in the holidays.'

'And there is no one else you will regret, Jill?' I asked, anxious to sound her on one point.

'Oh yes; I am sorry to bid good-bye to Mr. Tudor. He has been such fun lately. I really do think he is quite the nicest young man I know.'

'Do you know many young men, my dear?' was my apparently innocent remark; but Jill was not deceived by this smooth speech.

'Of course I do,' in a scornful voice; 'they come to see Sara, and I hate them so, flimsy stuck-up creatures, with their white ties and absurd little moustaches. Each one is more stupid and vapid than the other. And Sara must think so too; for she smiles on them all alike.'

'You are terribly hard on the young men of your generation, Jill; I daresay I should think them very harmless and pleasant.' But she shook her head vigorously.

'Why cannot they be natural, and say good-natured things,

like Mr. Tudor? He is real, and not make-believe, pretending that he is too bored to live at all. One would think there was no truth anywhere, nothing but tinsel and sham, to listen to them. That is why I like Mr. Tudor: he has the ring of the true metal about him. Even Miss Darrell agrees with me there.'

'Do you discuss Mr. Tudor with Miss Darrell?'

'Why not?' opening her eyes widely. 'I like to talk about my friends, and I feel Mr. Tudor is a real friend. She was so interested,—really interested, I mean, without any humbug,—at least, pretence,' for here I held up my finger at Jill. 'She wanted to know if you liked him too, and I said, "Oh yes, so much; he was a great favourite of yours," and she seemed pleased to hear it.'

'You silly child! I wish you would leave me and my likes and dislikes out of your conversations with Miss Darrell.'

'Well, do you know, I try to do so, because I know how you hate her,—at least, dislike her: that is a more ladylike term,—you are so horribly particular, Ursula; but somehow your name always gets in, and I never know how, and there is no keeping you out. Sometimes she makes me dreadfully angry about you, and sometimes she says nice things; but there, we will not talk about the double-faced lady to-night. I understand her less than ever.'

We glided into more serious subjects after this. I made Jill promise to be more patient with her life, and work from a greater sense of duty, and I begged her most earnestly to fight against discontent, and exorcise this youthful demon of hers, and again she promised to do her best.

'I feel better about things, somehow: you have done me good, Ursie; you always do. I must make mother understand that I am nearly a woman, and that I do not intend to waste my time any longer dreaming childish dreams. I suppose mother is really fond of me, though she does find fault with me continually, and is always praising Sara.' Jill went on talking in this way for some time, and then we went upstairs together.

I was rather provoked to find Mr. Tudor at the station the next morning. I suppose my steady look abashed him, for he muttered something about Smith's bookstall, as though I should be deceived by such a flimsy excuse. After all, Mr. Tudor was not better than other young men; in spite of Jill's praises, he was capable of this mild subterfuge to get his own way.

Jill was so honestly and childishly pleased to see him that I ought to have been disarmed. She went off with him to the bookstall, while I looked after her luggage, and they stood there chattering and laughing until I joined them, and then Mr. Tudor grew suddenly quiet.

As the train came up, I heard him ask Jill how long they were to stay at Hastings, and if they would be at Hyde Park Gate before Easter.

'I shall be up in town then,' he remarked carelessly, 'to see some of my people.'

'Oh yes, and you must come and see us,' she returned cheerfully. 'Good-bye, Mr. Tudor. I am so sorry to leave Heathfield.'

But, after all, Jill's last look was for me: as she leaned out of the carriage, waving her hand, she did not even glance at the young man who was standing silent and gloomy beside me. I felt rather sorry for the poor boy, as he turned away quite sadly.

'I must go down to the schools: good-bye, Miss Garston,' he said hurriedly. One would have thought he had to make up for lost time, as he strode through the station and up the long road. Had Jill really taken his fancy, I wondered? had her big eyes and quaint speeches bewitched him? Mr. Tudor was a gentleman, and we all liked him; but what would Uncle Brian and Aunt Philippa say if a needy, good-looking young curate were suddenly to present himself as a lover for their daughter Jocelyn? Why, Jill would be rich some day,—poor Ralph was dead, and she and Sara would be co-heiresses. Her parents would expect her to make a grand match.

I shook my head gravely over poor Lawrence's prospects as I took my way slowly up the hill. I was rather glad when his broad shoulders were out of sight; I should be sorry if any disappointment were to cloud his cheery nature.

I missed Jill a great deal at first, but in my heart I was not sorry to get rid of the responsibility; a lively girl of sixteen, with strong individuality and marked precocity, is likely to be a formidable charge; but Mrs. Barton lamented her absence in no measured terms.

'It seems so dull without Miss Jocelyn,' she said, the first evening. 'She was such a lively young lady, and made us all cheerful. Why, she would run in and out the kitchen a dozen times a day, to feed the chickens, or pet the cat, or watch me

knead the bread. She and Nathaniel got on famously together, and often and often I have found her helping him with the books, and laughing so merrily when he made a mistake. I used to think Nathaniel did it on purpose sometimes, just for the fun of it.'

Yes, we all missed Jill, and I for one loved the girl dearly. It made me quite happy one day when she wrote a long letter, telling me that she was delighted with her new governess.

'Miss Gillespie is as nice as possible,' she wrote. 'I already feel quite fond of her; my lessons are as interesting now as they used to be dull with Fräulein. She knows a great deal, and is not ashamed to confess when she is ignorant of anything; she says right out that she cannot answer my questions, and proposes that we should study it together. I quite enjoy our walks and talks, for she takes so much interest in all I tell her. She is a little dull and sad sometimes, as though she were thinking of past troubles; but I like to feel that I can cheer her up and do her good. Mother and Sara are delighted with her; she plays so beautifully, and they say that she is such a gentlewoman. When we come downstairs in the evening she will not allow me to creep into a corner; she makes me join in the conversation, and coaxes me to play my pieces; and she tries to prevent mother making horrid little remarks on my awkwardness.

'"It will all come right, Mrs. Garston," I heard her say one day. "It is far wiser not to notice it: young girls are so sensitive, and Jocelyn is keenly alive to her shortcomings." And mother actually nodded assent to this, and the next moment she called me up, and said how much I had improved in my playing, and that Colonel Ferguson had told her that I had been exceedingly well taught.

'By the bye, I am quite sure that Colonel Ferguson intends to be my brother-in-law: he is always here in the evening, and yesterday he sent Sara such a magnificent bouquet.'

Jill's chatty letters were always amusing. She had prepared me beforehand, so I was not surprised at receiving a voluminous letter from Aunt Philippa a few days afterwards, informing me of Sara's engagement to Colonel Ferguson.

'Your uncle and I are delighted with the match,' she wrote. 'Colonel Ferguson belongs to a very good old family, and he has private property. Your uncle says that he is a very intelligent man, and is much respected in the regiment.

'Mrs. Fullerton thinks it is a pity for Sara to marry a

widower; but I call that nonsense; he is a young-looking man for his age, and every one thinks him so handsome. Sara, poor darling, is as happy as possible. I believe that they are to be married soon after Easter, as he wants to get some salmon-fishing in Norway: so we shall come up to Hyde Park Gate early next week, and see about the trousseau, for there is no time to be lost.'

Sara added a few words in her pretty girlish handwriting.

'I wonder if you will be very much surprised by mamma's letter, Ursula dear. We all thought he liked Lesbia, but no, he says that was entirely a mistake on our part, he never really thought of her at all.

'Of course I am very happy. I think there is no one like Donald in the world. I cannot imagine why such a wise, clever man should fall in love with a silly little body like me. I suppose I must please him in some way, for, really, he seems dreadfully in love.

'You must come to my wedding, Ursula, and I must choose your dress for you; of course father will pay for it, but I promise you it shall be pretty, and suitable to your complexion. I mean to have eight bridesmaids. Jocelyn will be one, of course, and I shall get that tall, fair Grace Underley to act as a foil to her bigness. I shall not ask poor Lesbia to be one; it would be too trying for her, and I know you will not care about it; but you must come for a week, and see all my pretty things, and help poor mamma, for she has only Jocelyn: so remember you are to keep yourself disengaged the week after Easter.'

I wrote back that same evening warm congratulations to Sara and Aunt Philippa, and promised to come when Sara wanted me. A gay wedding was not to my taste, but I knew I owed this duty to them: they had been kind to me in their own fashion and according to their lights, and I would not fail them. Easter would fall late this year,—in the middle of April: there were still three months before Sara would be married, and most likely by that time I should need a few days' rest and change.

The next morning I heard from Lesbia. It was a kind, sad little letter; she told me she was glad about Sara's engagement, and as they were still at Hastings she and her mother had called at Warrior Square, and had found Sara and her *fiancé* together.

'I think it has improved Sara already,' it went on; 'she

was looking exceedingly pretty, and in good spirits, and she seemed very proud of her tall, grave-looking soldier. Mother and I always liked Colonel Ferguson. He and Sara are complete contrasts; I think her brightness and good-humour, as well as her beauty, have attracted him, for he is honestly in love! I liked the quiet, deferential way in which he treated her. I am sure he will make a kind husband. Mrs. Garston looked as happy as possible. I did not see Jocelyn; she was out riding with her father.

'We are going down to dear Rutherford in March, but I have promised Sara to come up for the wedding. Don't sigh, Ursula: it is all in the day's work, and one has to do trying things sometimes.

'I have come to think that perhaps dear Charlie is better off where he is. He was so enthusiastic and so true that life must have disappointed him. Perhaps I should have disappointed him too; but no, I should have loved him too well to do that.

'I shall love to be at Rutherford during the spring. Everything will remind me of those sweet spring days two years ago. Oh, those walks and rides, and the evening when we listened to the nightingale and he told me that he loved me! I remember the very patch of grass where I stood. There was a little clump of alders, and I can see how he looked then. Oh, Ursula, these memories are very sad, but they are sweet, too; for Charlie is our Charlie still, is he not?'

'Poor Lesbia!' I sighed, as I folded up her letter and prepared for my day's work. 'It must be hard for her to witness Sara's happiness, when her own life is so clouded. Her heart is still true to Charlie; but she is so young, and life is so long. I trust that better things are in store for her.'

Miss Locke was recovering very slowly. Years of anxiety and hard work had overtaxed her strength sorely. Mr. Hamilton used to shake his head over her tardy progress, and tell her that she was a very unsatisfactory patient, and that he had expected to cure her long before this.

'If it were not for you and my dear Miss Garston, I should never be lying here now,' she returned gratefully. 'I must have died; you know that, doctor; and even now, in spite of all the good things you send me, I am so weary and fit for nothing I feel as though I should never sit up again.'

'Oh, we shall have you up before long,' he returned cheerfully. 'You are only rather slow about it. You are not

troubling about your work or anything else, I hope, because the rent is paid, and there is plenty in the cupboard for Phœbe and Kitty.'

'I know you have paid the rent, and I shall never be grateful enough to you, doctor; for what should I have done, with this long illness making me behindhand with everything? I am afraid Miss Garston puts her hand in her pocket sometimes. I hope the Lord will bless you both for your goodness to two helpless women. Ay, and he will bless you, doctor!'

'I am sure I hope so,' he returned, in a good-humoured tone, shaking her hand. 'There! mind what your nurse says, and keep yourself easy: you will find Phœbe a different person when you see her next.'

I was afraid Phœbe would find her sister much changed when they met. Miss Locke had greatly aged since her illness; her hair was much grayer, and her face was sunken, and I doubted whether she would ever be the same woman again. Mr. Hamilton and I had already discussed the sisters' future.

'I am afraid they will be terribly pinched,' he said once. 'Miss Locke is suffering now from years of overwork. She will never be able to work as hard as she has done. And she has to provide for that child Kitty, as well as for poor Phœbe.'

'We must think what is to be done,' I replied. 'Miss Locke is a very good manager: she is careful and thrifty. A little will go a long way with her.'

Mr. Hamilton said no more on the subject just then, but a few days afterwards he told me that he intended to buy the cottage. He had a good deal of house-property in Heathfield, and a cottage more or less did not matter to him.

'They shall live in it rent-free, and I will take care of the repairs. There will be no need for Miss Locke to work so hard then. She is a good woman, and I thoroughly respect her. Of course I know she is a favourite of yours, Miss Garston, but you must not think that influences me.'

'As though I should imagine such a thing!' I returned, in quite an affronted tone. But Mr. Hamilton only laughed.

'You are such an insignificant person, you see,' he went on mischievously. 'You are of so little use to your generation. People do not benefit by your example, or defer to your opinion. There is no St. Ursula in the calendar.' Now what did he mean by all this rigmarole? But he only laughed again in a provoking way, and went out.

I had had both the sisters on my hands. Those hours of fearful suspense had told on Phœbe, and for a week or two we were very anxious about her.

I kept the extent of her illness from Susan, and she never knew that Mr. Hamilton visited her daily. Strange to say, Phœbe gave us little trouble. She bore her bodily sufferings with surprising patience, and even made light of them; and she would thank me most gratefully when I waited on her.

I was never long in her room. There was no reading or singing now. Nothing would induce her to keep me from Susan. She used to beg me to go back to Susan and leave her to Kitty. I never forgot Susan's look of astonishment when I told her this.

'Somehow, it doesn't sound like Phœbe,' she said, looking at me a little wistfully. 'Are you sure you understand her, Miss Garston?—that something has not put her out? She has often sulked with me like that.'

'Oh, Phœbe never sulks now,' I returned, smiling at this view of the case. 'She is not like the same woman, Susan. She thinks of other people now.' Miss Locke heard me silently, but I saw that she was still incredulous. She was not sanguine enough to hope for a miracle; and surely only a miracle could change Phœbe's sullen and morbid nature.

The sisters were longing to meet, but the helplessness of the one and the long-protracted weakness of the other kept them long apart, though only a short flight of stairs divided them.

At last I thought we might venture to bring Susan into Phœbe's room.

The weather was less severe, and Susan seemed a little stronger, so Kitty and I hurried ourselves in preparation for a festive tea in Phœbe's room.

She watched us with unconcealed interest as we spread the tea-cloth, and arranged the best china, and then placed an easy-chair by her bedside.

The room really looked very bright and cosy. A little gray kitten that I had brought Kitty was asleep on the quilt; Phœbe had taken a great fancy to the pretty, playful little creature, and it was always with her; Kitty's large wax doll was lying with its curly head on her pillow.

Susan trembled very much as she entered the room, leaning heavily on my arm. Phœbe lay quite motionless, watching her as she walked slowly towards the bed, then her face suddenly grew pitiful, and she held out her arms.

'Oh, how ill you look, my poor Susan, and so old and gray! but what does it matter, so that I have got my Susan back? If you had died, I should have died too; God never meant to punish me like that.' And she stroked and kissed her face as though she were a child, and for a little while the two sisters mingled their tears together.

Susan was too weak for much emotion, so I placed her comfortably in her easy-chair, and bade her look at Phœbe without troubling to talk; but her heart was too full for silence.

'Why, my woman,' she burst out, 'you look real bonnie! I do believe your face has got a bit of colour in it, and you remind me of the old Phœbe; nay,' as Phœbe laughed at this, 'I never thought to hear you laugh again, my dearie.'

'It is with the pleasure of seeing you,' returned Phœbe. 'If you only knew what I suffered while you lay ill! "there is no improvement," they said, and Miss Garston looked at me so pityingly; and if you had died and never spoken to me again,—and I had refused to bid you good-night,—you remember, Susan! oh, I think my heart would have broken if you had gone away and left me like that.'

'Nay, I should have thought nothing about it, but that it was just Phœbe's way. Do you mean that you fretted about that, lass? Oh,' turning to me, for Phœbe was crying bitterly over the recollection, 'I would not believe you, Miss Garston, when you said Phœbe was changed, for I said to myself, "Surely she will be up to her old tricks again soon"; but now I see you are right. Nay, never fret, my bonnie woman, for I loved you when you were as tiresome and cross-grained as possible. I think I cannot help loving you,' finished Susan simply, as she took her sister's hand.

That was a happy evening that we spent in Phœbe's room. When tea was over we read a few chapters, Kitty and I, and then I sang some of Phœbe's favourite songs. When I had finished, I looked at them: Phœbe had fallen asleep with Susan's hand still in hers: there was a look of peaceful rest on the worn gray face that made me whisper to Miss Locke,—

'The evil spirit is cast out at last, Susan.'

'Ay,' returned Susan quietly. 'She is clothed and in her right mind, and I doubt not sitting at the feet of Him who has called her. I have got my Phœbe back again, thank God, as I have not seen her for many a long year.'

CHAPTER XXVI

I HEAR ABOUT CAPTAIN HAMILTON

It was now more than five weeks since Gladys had left us, but during that time I had heard from her frequently.

Her letters were deeply interesting. She wrote freely, pouring out her thoughts on every subject without reserve. Somehow I felt, as I read them, that those letters gave as much pleasure to the writer as to the recipient; and I found afterwards that this was the case. Her consciousness of my sympathy with her made her open her heart more freely to me than to any other person. She delighted in telling me of the books she read, in describing the various effects of nature. Her descriptions were so powerful and graphic that they quite surprised me. She made me feel as though I were walking through the fir woods beside her, or standing on the sea-shore watching the white-crested waves rolling in and breaking into foam at our feet. A sort of dewy freshness seemed to stamp the pages. Gladys loved nature with all her heart; she revelled in the solemn grandeur of those woods, in the breadth and freedom of the ocean; it seemed to harmonise with her varying moods.

'I feel a different creature already,' she wrote when she had been away a fortnight. 'Without owning myself happy (but happiness, active or negative, will never come to me again), still I am calmer and more at peace,—away from the oppressive influences that surrounded me at home.

'I have made up my mind that the atmosphere of Gladwyn is fatal to my soul's health. I seem to wither up like some sensitive plant in that blighting air; half-truths, misunderstandings, and jealousies have corroded our home peace. I am better

away from it all, for here I can own myself ill and miserable, and no one blames or misapprehends my meaning: there are no harsh judgments under the guise of pity.

'These dear people are so truly charitable, they think no evil of a poor girl who is faithful to a brother's memory: they are patient with my sad moods, they leave me free to follow out my wishes. I wander about as I will, I sketch or read, I sit idle; no one blames me; they are as good to me as you would be in their place.

'I shall stay away as long as possible, until I feel strong enough to take up my life again. You will not be vexed with me, my dear Ursula: you know how I have suffered; you of all others will sympathise with me. Think of the relief it is to wake up in the morning and feel that no jarring influences will be at work that day; that no eyes will pry into my secret sorrow, or seek to penetrate my very thoughts; that I may look and speak as I like; that my words will not be twisted to serve other people's purposes. Forgive me if I speak harshly, but indeed you do not know all yet. Your last letter made me a little sad, you speak so much of Giles. Do you really think I am hard upon him? The idea is painful to me.

'I like you to think well of him. He is a good man. I have always thoroughly respected him, but there is no sympathy between us. Of course it is more Etta's fault than his: she has usurped my place, and Giles no longer needs me. Perhaps I am not kind to him, not sisterly or soft in my manners; but he treats me too much as a child. He never asks my opinion on any subject. We live under his protection, and he never grudges us money; he is generous in that way; but he never enters into our thoughts. Lady Betty and I lead our own lives.

'You ask me why I do not write to him, my dear Ursula. Such a thought would never enter my head. Write to Giles! What should I say to him? How would such a letter ever get itself written? Do you suppose he would care for me as a correspondent? I should like you to ask him that question, if you dared. Giles's face would be a study. I fancy I write that letter,—a marvellous composition of commonplace nothings. "My dear brother, I think you will like to hear our Bournemouth news," etc. I can imagine him tossing it aside as he opens his other letters: "Gladys has actually written to me. I suppose she wants another cheque. See what she says, Etta. You may read it aloud, if you like, while I finish my breakfast."

Now do not look incredulous. I once saw Lady Betty's letter treated in this way, and all her poor little sentences pulled to pieces in Etta's usual fashion. No, thank you, I will not write to Giles. I write to Lady Betty sometimes, but not often: that is why she comes to you for news. We are a queer household, Ursula. I am very fond of my dear little Lady Betty, but somehow I have never enjoyed writing to her since Etta one day handed to her one of my letters opened by mistake. Lady Betty has fancied the mistake has occurred more than once.'

I put down this letter with a sigh; it was the only painful one I had received from Gladys. My remark about her writing to her brother had evidently upset her, but after this she did not speak much about Gladwyn, and by tacit consent we spoke little about any of her people except Lady Betty. When I mentioned Mr. Hamilton I did so casually, and only with reference to my own work. He was so mixed up with my daily life, I came so continually into contact with him, that it was impossible to avoid his name.

Gladys understood this, for she once replied,—

'I am really and honestly glad that you and Giles work so well together. He will be a good friend to you, I know, for when he forms a favourable opinion of a person he is slow to change it, and Giles is one who, with all his faults, will go through fire and water for his friends. I like to hear of him in this way, for you always put him in the best light, and though you may not believe it after all my hard speeches, I am sufficiently proud of my brother to wish him to be properly appreciated.' And after this I mentioned him less reluctantly.

Max came back about ten days after Jill had left us. I found him waiting for me one evening when I got back to the cottage. As usual, he greeted me most affectionately, only he laughed when I made him turn to the light that I might see how he looked.

'Well, what is your opinion, Ursula, my dear? I hope you have noticed the gray hairs in my beard. I saw them there this morning.'

'You are rather tanned by the cold winds. I suppose Torquay has done you good; but your eyes have not lost their tired look, Max: you are not a bit rested.'

'I believe I want more work: too much rest would kill me with ennui,' stretching out his arms with a sort of weary gesture. 'I walked a great deal at Torquay; I was out in the air all

day; but it did not seem to be what I wanted: I was terribly bored. Tudor is glad to get me back. The fellow actually seems dull. Have you any idea what has gone wrong with him, Ursula?' But I prudently turned a deaf ear to this question, and he did not follow it up; and a moment afterwards he mentioned that he had been at Gladwyn, and that Miss Darrell had given him a good account of Miss Hamilton.

'I had no idea that she was away until this afternoon. Her departure was rather sudden, was it not?'

I think he was glad when I gave him Gladys's message; but he looked rather grave when I told him how much she was enjoying her freedom.

'She seems a different creature; those Maberleys are so good to her; they pet her, and yet leave her uncontrolled to follow her own wishes. I am more at rest about her there.'

'A girl ought to be happy in her own home,' he returned, somewhat moodily. 'I think Miss Hamilton has indulged her sadness long enough. Perhaps there are other reasons for her being better. I suppose she has not heard——?' And here he stopped rather awkwardly.

'Do you mean whether she has heard anything of Eric? Oh no, Max.'

'No, I was not meaning that,' looking at me rather astonished. 'Of course we know the poor boy is dead. I was only wondering if she had had an Indian letter lately. Well, it is none of my affair, and I cannot wait to hear more now. Good-night, little she-bear; I am off.' And he actually was off, in spite of my calling him quite loudly in the porch, for I wanted him to tell me what he meant. Had Gladys any special correspondent in India? I wondered if I might venture to question Lady Betty.

As it very often happens, she played quite innocently into my hands, for the very next day she came to tell me that she had had a letter from Gladys.

'It was a very short one,' she grumbled. 'Only she had an Indian letter to answer, and that took up her time, so that was a pretty good excuse for once.'

'Has Gladys any special friend in India?'

'Only Claude!—I mean our cousin, Claude Hamilton. Have you not often heard us talk of him? How strange! Why, he used to stay with us for months at a time, and he and Gladys were great friends: they correspond. He is Captain

Hamilton now; his regiment was ordered to India just at the time poor dear Eric disappeared; he was awfully shocked about that, I remember. Etta wrote and told him all about it; he was a great favourite of hers. We none of us thought him handsome except Etta; he was a nice-looking fellow, but nothing else.'

'And you and Gladys are fond of him?'

'Oh yes.' But here Lady Betty looked a little queer.

'Gladys writes to him most: she has always been his correspondent. Now and then I get a letter written to me. You see, he has no one else belonging to him, now his mother is dead. Aunt Agnes died about two years ago, and he never had brothers or sisters, so he adopted us.'

'Uncle Max knew him, of course?'

'To be sure. Mr. Cunliffe knew all our people. Claude was a favourite of his, too. I think every one liked him; he was so straightforward, and never did anything mean. I think he will make a splendid officer; he has had fever lately, and we rather expect he is coming home on sick-leave. Etta hopes so.'

'Gladys has never spoken of her cousin to me.'

'That is because you two are always talking about other things,—poor Eric, for example. Gladys likes to talk about Claude, of course: he is her own cousin.' And Lady Betty's manner was just a little defiant, as though I had accused Gladys of some indiscretion. I heard her mutter, 'They find plenty of fault with her about that,' but I took no notice. I had satisfied my curiosity, and I knew now why Max fancied an Indian letter would raise Gladys's spirits; but all the same he might have spoken out. Max had no business to be so mysterious with me.

I heard Captain Hamilton's name again shortly afterwards. I was calling at Gladwyn one afternoon. I was loath to do so in Gladys's absence, but I dared not discontinue my visits entirely, for fear of Miss Darrell's remarks. To my surprise, I found her *tête-à-tête* with Uncle Max. She welcomed me with a great show of cordiality; but before I had been five minutes in the room I found out that my visit was inopportune, though Max seemed unfeignedly pleased to see me, and she had repeated his words in almost parrot-like fashion. 'Oh yes, I am so glad to see you, Miss Garston! it is so good of you to call when dear Gladys is away! Of course I know she is the attraction: we all know that, do we not?' smiling sweetly upon me. 'She has

been away more than five weeks now,—dear, dear! how time flies!—really five weeks, and this is your first call.'

'You know how Miss Locke's illness has engrossed me,' I remonstrated. 'I never pretend to mere conventional calls.'

'No, indeed. You have a code of your own, have you not? Your niece is fortunate, Mr. Cunliffe. She makes her own laws, while we poor inferior mortals are obliged to conform to the world's dictates. I wish I were strong-minded like you. It must be such a pleasure to be free and despise *les convenances*. People are so artificial, are they not?'

'Ursula is not artificial, at any rate,' returned Max, with a benevolent glance. It had struck me as I entered the room that he looked rather bored and ill at ease, but Miss Darrell was in high spirits, and looked almost handsome. I never saw her better dressed.

'No, indeed. Miss Garston is almost too frank; not that that is a fault. Oh yes, Miss Locke's illness has been a tedious affair: even Giles got weary of it, and used to grumble at having to go every day. Of course, seeing Giles once or twice a day, you heard all our news, so we did not expect you to toil up here: that would have been unnecessary trouble after your hard work.'

Miss Darrell spoke quite civilly, and I do not know why her speech rankled and made me reply, rather quickly,—

'Nurses do not gossip with the doctor, Miss Darrell. Mr Hamilton has told me no news, I assure you. Gladys's letters tell me far more.'

I was angry with myself when I said this, for why need I have answered her at all or taken notice of her remark? and, above all, why need I have mentioned Gladys's name? Miss Darrell's colour rose in a moment.

'Dear me! I am glad to hear dear Gladys writes to you. She does not honour us. Lady Betty gets a note sometimes, but Giles and I are never favoured with a word. Giles feels terribly hurt about it sometimes, but I tell him it is only Gladys's way. Girls are careless sometimes. Of course she does not mean to slight him.'

'Of course not,' rather gravely from Max.

'All the same it is very neglectful on Gladys's part. If you are a real friend, Miss Garston, you will tell her what a mistake it is,—really a fatal mistake, though I do not dare to tell her so. I see Giles's look of disappointment when the post brings him nothing but dry business letters. He is so anxious about her

health. He let her go so willingly, and yet not one word of recognition for her own, I may say her only, brother.'

Max was looking so exceedingly grave by this time that I longed to change the subject. I would say a word in defence of Gladys when we were alone, he and I. It would be worse than useless to speak before Miss Darrell. She would twist my words before my face. I never said a word in Gladys's behalf that she did not make me repent it.

The next moment, however, she had started on a different tack.

'Oh, do you know, Mr. Cunliffe,' she said carelessly, as she crossed the hearth-rug to ring the bell, 'we have heard again from Captain Hamilton?'

Max raised his head quickly. 'Indeed! I hope he is quite well. By the bye, I remember you told me he had a touch of fever; but I trust he has got the better of that.'

'We hope so,' in a very impressive tone; 'but it was a sharp attack, and no doubt home-sickness and worry of mind accelerated the mischief. Poor Claude! I fear he has suffered much; not that he says so himself: he is far too proud to complain. But he is likely to come home on sick-leave; next mail will settle the question, but I believe we may expect him about the end of July.'

'Indeed! That is good news for all of you'; but the poker that Max had taken up fell with a little crash among the fire-irons. Miss Darrell gave a faint scream, and then laughed at her foolish nervousness.

'It was very clumsy on my part,' stammered Max. Could it be my fancy, or had he turned suddenly pale, as though something had startled him too?

'Oh no, it was only my poor nerves,' replied Miss Darrell, with her brightest smile. 'What was I saying? Oh yes, I remember now,—about Claude: he wrote to Gladys to ask if he might come, and she said yes. Ah, here comes tea, and I believe I heard Giles's ring at the bell.'

I cannot tell which of the two revealed it to me,—whether it was the sudden pallor on Max's face, or the curious watchful look that I detected in Miss Darrell's eyes: it was only there for a moment, but it reminded me of the look with which a cat eyes the mouse she has just drawn within her claws. I saw it all then with a quick flash of intuition. I had partly guessed it before, but now I was sure of it.

My poor Max, so brave and cheery and patient! But she

should not torment him any longer in my presence. If he had to suffer,—and the cause of that suffering was still a mystery to me,—she should not spy out his weakness. He had turned his face aside with a quick look of pain as he spoke, and the next moment I had mounted the breach and was begging Miss Darrell to assist me in the case of a poor family,—old hospital acquaintances of mine, who were emigrating to New Zealand.

My importunity seemed to surprise her. My sudden loquacity was an interruption; but I would not be repressed or silenced. I took the chair beside her, and made her look at me. I fixed her wandering attention and pressed her until she grew irritable with impatience. I saw Max was recovering himself: by and by he gave a forced laugh.

'You will have to give in, Miss Darrell. Ursula always gets her own way. How much do you want, child? You must be merciful to a poor vicar. Will that satisfy you?' offering me a sovereign, and Miss Darrell, after a moment's hesitation, produced the same sum from her purse.

I took her money coolly, but I would not resign the reins of the conversation any more into her hands. When Mr. Hamilton entered the room he stopped and looked at me with visible astonishment: he had never heard me so fluent before; but somehow my eloquence died a natural death after his entrance. I was still a little shy with Mr. Hamilton.

His manner was unusually genial this afternoon. I was sure he was delighted to see us both there again. He spoke to Max in a jesting tone, and then looked benignly at his cousin, who was superintending the tea-table. She certainly looked uncommonly well that day; her dress of dark maroon cashmere and velvet fitted her fine figure exquisitely; her white, well-shaped hands were, as usual, loaded with brilliant rings. She was a woman who needed ornaments: they would have looked lavish on any one else, they suited her admirably. Once I caught her looking with marked disfavour on my black serge dress: the pearl hoop that had been my mother's keeper was my sole adornment. I daresay she thought me extremely dowdy. I once heard her say, in a pointed manner, that 'her cousin Giles liked to see his women-folk well dressed; he was very fastidious on that point, and exceedingly hard to please.'

Mr. Hamilton seemed in the best of humours. I do not think that he remarked how very quiet Max was all tea-time. He pressed us to remain to dinner, and wanted to send off a

message to the vicarage; but we were neither of us to be persuaded, though Miss Darrell joined her entreaties to her cousin's.

I was anxious to leave the house as quickly as possible, and I knew by instinct what Max's feelings must be. I could not enjoy Mr. Hamilton's conversation, amusing as it was. I wanted to be alone with Max; I felt I could keep silence with him no longer. But we could not get rid of Mr. Hamilton; as we rose to take our departure he coolly announced his intention of walking with us.

'The Tylcotes have sent for me again,' he said casually. 'I may as well walk down with you now.' He looked at me as he spoke, but I am afraid my manner disappointed him. For once Mr. Hamilton was decidedly *de trop*. I am sure he must have noticed my hesitation, but it made no difference to his purpose. I had found out by this time that when Mr. Hamilton had made up his mind to do a certain thing, other people's moods did not influence him in the least. He half smiled as he went out to put on his greatcoat, and, as though he intended to punish me for my want of courtesy, he talked to Max the whole time; not that I minded it in the least, only it was just his lordly way.

To my great relief, however, he left us as soon as we reached the vicarage, so I wished him good-night quite amiably, and of course Max walked on with me to the cottage.

He was actually leaving me at the gate without a word except 'Good-night, Ursula,' but I laid my hand on his arm.

'You must come in, Max. I want to speak to you.'

'Not to-night, my dear,' he returned hurriedly. 'I have business letters to write before dinner.'

'They must wait, then,' I replied decidedly, 'for I certainly do not intend to let you leave me just yet. Don't be stubborn, Max, for you know I always get my own way. Come in. I want to tell you why Gladys never writes to her brother.' And he followed me into the house without a word.

CHAPTER XXVII

MAX OPENS HIS HEART

BUT I did not at once join Max in the parlour, though he was evidently expecting me to do so: instead of that, I ran upstairs to take off my walking-things. It would be better to leave him alone a few minutes. When I returned he was leaning back in the easy-chair, with his hands clasped behind his head, evidently absorbed in thought. I was struck by his expression: it was that of a man who was nerving himself to bear some great trouble; there was a quiet, hopeless look on his face that touched me exceedingly. I took the chair opposite him, and waited for him to speak. He did not change his attitude when he saw me, but he looked at me gravely, and said, 'Well, Ursula?' but there was no interest in his tone.

Of course I knew what he meant, but I let that pass, and something seemed to choke my voice as I tried to answer him:

'Never mind that now: we will come to that presently. I want to tell you that I know it now, Max. I guessed a little of it before, but now I am sure of it.'

I had roused him effectually. A sort of dusky red came to his face as he sat up and looked at me. He did not ask me what I meant: we understood each other in a moment. He only sighed heavily, and said, 'I have never told you anything, Ursula, have I?' but his manner testified no displeasure. He would never have spoken a word to me of his own accord, and yet my sympathy would be a relief to him. I knew Max's nature so well: he was a shy, reticent man; he could not speak easily of his own feelings unless the ice were broken for him.

'Max,' I pleaded, and the tears came into my eyes, 'if my

dear mother were living you would have told her all without reserve.'

'I should not have needed to tell her: she would have guessed it, Ursula. Poor Emmie! I never could keep anything from her. I have often told you you are like her: you reminded me of her this afternoon.'

'Then you must make me your *confidante* in her stead. Do not refuse me again, Max: I have asked this before. In spite of our strange relationship, we are still like brother and sister. You know how quickly I guessed Charlie's secret: surely you can speak to me, who am her friend, of your affection for Gladys.'

I saw him shrink a little at that, and his honest brown eyes were full of pain.

'My affection for Gladys,' he repeated, in a low voice. 'You are very frank, Ursula; but somehow I do not seem to mind it. I never care for Miss Darrell to speak to me on the subject, although she has been so kind; in fact, no one could have been kinder. We can only act up to our own natures: it is certainly not her fault, but only my misfortune, that her sympathy jars on me.'

Max's words gave me acute pain.

'Surely you have not chosen Miss Darrell for your *confidante*, Max?'

'I have chosen no one,' he returned, with gentle rebuke at my vehemence. 'Circumstances made Miss Darrell acquainted with my unlucky attachment. She did all she could to help me, and out of common gratitude I could not refuse to listen to her well-meant efforts to comfort me.'

I remained silent from sheer dismay. Things were far worse than I had imagined. I began to lose hope from the moment I heard Miss Darrell had been mixed up in the affair; the thought sickened me. I could hardly bear to hear Max speak; and yet how was I to help him unless he made me acquainted with the real state of the case?

'I suppose I had better tell you all from the beginning,' he said, rather dejectedly; 'that is, as far as I know myself, for I can hardly tell you when I began to love Gladys. I call her Gladys to myself,' with a faint smile, 'and it comes naturally to me. I ought to have said Miss Hamilton.'

'But not to me, Max,' I returned eagerly.

'What does it matter what I call her? She will never take

the only name I want to give her!' was the melancholy reply to this. 'I only know one thing, Ursula, that for three years—ay, and longer than that—she has been the one woman in the world to me, and that as long as she and I live no other woman shall ever cross the threshold of the vicarage as its mistress.'

'Has it gone so deep as that, my poor Max?'

'Yes,' he returned briefly. 'But we need not enter into that part of the subject; a man had best keep his own counsel in such matters. I want to tell you bare facts, Ursula; we may as well leave feelings alone. If you can help me to understand one or two points that are still misty to my comprehension, you will do me good service.'

'I will try my very best for you both.'

'Thank you, but we cannot both be helped in the same way; our paths do not lie together. Miss Hamilton has refused to become my wife.'

'Oh, Max! not refused, surely.' This was another blow,—that he should have tried and failed,—that Gladys with her own lips should have refused him; but perhaps he had written to her, and there was some misunderstanding; but when I hinted this to Max he shook his head.

'We cannot misunderstand a person's words. Oh yes, I spoke to her, and she answered me; but I must not tell you things in this desultory fashion, or you will never understand. I have told you that I do not know when my attachment to Miss Hamilton commenced. It was gradual and imperceptible at first,—very real, no doubt, but it had not mastered my reason. I always admired her: how could I help it?' with some emotion. 'Even you, who are not her lover, have owned to me that she is a beautiful creature. I suppose her beauty attracted me first, until I saw the sweetness and unselfishness of her nature, and from that moment I lost my heart.

'The full consciousness came to me at the time of their trouble about Eric. I had been fond of the poor fellow, for his own sake as well as hers, but I never disguised his faults from her. I often told her that I feared for Eric's future; he had no ballast, it wanted a moral earthquake to steady him, and it was no wonder that his caprices and extravagant moods angered his brother. She used to be half offended with me for my plain speaking, but she was too gentle to resent it, and she would beg me to use my influence with Hamilton to entreat him not to be so hard on Eric.

'When the blow came, I was always up at Gladwyn once, sometimes twice, a day. They all wanted me; it was my duty to be their consoler. I am glad to remember now that I was some comfort to her.'

'Wait a moment, Max; I must ask you something. Do you believe that Eric was guilty?'

'I am almost sorry that you have put that question,' he returned reluctantly. 'I never would tell her what I thought. It was all a mystery. Eric might have been tempted; it was not for me to say. She could see I was doubtful. I told her that, whether he were sinned against or sinning, our only thought should be to bring him back and reconcile him to his brother. "God will prove his innocence if he be blackened falsely," I said to her; and, strange to say, she forgave me my doubts.'

'Oh, Max, I see what you think.'

'How can I help it,' he replied, 'knowing Eric's character so well? he was so weak and impulsive, so easily led astray, and then he was under bad influences. You will have heard Edgar Brown's name. He was a wild, dissipated fellow, and Hamilton had a right to forbid the acquaintance; both he and I knew that Edgar had low propensities, and was always lounging about public-houses with a set of loafers like himself. He has got worse since then, and has nearly broken his mother's heart. Do you think any man with a sense of responsibility would permit a youth of Eric's age to have such a friend? Yet this was a standing grievance with Eric, and I am sorry to say his sister took Edgar's part. Of course she knew no better: innocence is credulous, and Edgar was a sprightly, good-looking fellow, the sort that women never fail to pet.'

'Yes, I see. Eric was certainly to blame in this.'

'He was faulty on many more points. I am afraid, Ursula you have been somewhat biassed by Miss Hamilton. You must remember that she idolised Eric,—that she was blind to many of his faults; she made excuses for him whenever it was possible to do so, but with all her weak partiality she could not deny that he was thriftless, idle, and extravagant, that he defied his brother's authority, that he even forgot himself so far as to use bad language in his presence. I believe, once, he even struck him; only Hamilton declared he had been drinking, so he merely turned him out of the room.'

I looked at Max sadly. 'This may be all true; but I cannot believe that he took that cheque.'

'The circumstantial evidence against him is very strong,' he replied quietly. 'You do not know what power a sudden temptation has over these weak natures: he was hard pressed, remember that; he had gambling debts, thanks to Edgar. Fancy gambling debts at twenty! I have tried to take Miss Hamilton's view of the case, but I cannot bring myself to believe in his innocence. Most likely he repented the moment he had done it, poor boy. Eric was no hardened sinner. I sometimes fear—at least, the terrible thought has crossed my mind, and I know Hamilton has had it too—that in his despair he might have made away with himself.'

'Oh, Max, this is too horrible!' And I shuddered as I thought of the beautiful young face so like Gladys's, with its bright frank look that seemed to appeal to one's heart.

'Well, well, we need not speak of it; but it was a sad time for all of us; and yet in some ways it was a happy time to me. It was such a comfort to feel that I was necessary to them all; that they looked for me daily; that they could not do without me. I used to be with Hamilton every evening; and when Gladys was very ill they sent for me, because they said no one knew how to soothe her so well.

'Do you wonder, Ursula, that, seeing her in her weakness and sorrow, she grew daily into my life, that my one thought was how I could help and comfort her?

'She was very gentle and submissive, and followed my advice in everything. When I told her that only work could cure her sore heart, she did not contradict me: in a little while I had to check her feverish activity. She had overwhelmed herself with duties; she managed our mothers' meetings with Miss Darrell's help, taught in our schools, and helped train the choir. I had allotted her a district, and she worked it admirably. She was my right hand in everything; all the poor people worshipped her.'

'Yes, Max,' for he paused, as though overwhelmed with some bitter-sweet recollection.

'I loved her more each day, but I respected her sorrow, and tried to hide my feelings from her. It was more than a year after Eric's disappearance before I ventured to speak, and then it was by Hamilton's advice that I did so. He had set his heart on the match. He told me more than once that he would rather have me as a brother-in-law than any other man.

'I thought I had prepared her sufficiently, but it seems that

she was very much startled by my proposal. Her trouble had so engrossed her that she had been perfectly blind to my meaning It was all in vain, Ursula, for she did not love me, —at least not in the right way. She told me so with tears, accusing herself of unkindness. She liked, most certainly she liked me, but perhaps she knew me too well.

'She was so unhappy at the thought of giving me pain, so sweet and gentle in her efforts to console me and heal the wound she had inflicted, that I could not lose hope. She told me that, though she had trusted me entirely as her friend, she had never thought of me as her lover, and the idea was strange to her. This thought gave me courage, and I begged that I might be allowed to speak to her again at some future time.

'She wanted to refuse, and said hurriedly that she never intended to marry. But I took these words as meaning nothing. A girl will tell you this and believe it as she says it. I suppose I pressed her hard to leave me this margin of hope, for after reflecting a few minutes she looked at me gravely and said it should be as I wished. In a year's time I might speak to her again, and she would know her own mind.

'I pleaded for a shorter ordeal, though secretly I was overjoyed at this crumb of consolation vouchsafed to me. But she was inexorable, though perfectly gentle in her manner.

'"I wish you had set your heart on some one else, Mr. Cunliffe," she said, with a melancholy smile, "for I can give you so little satisfaction. I feel so confused and weary, as though life afforded me no pleasure. But, indeed, I do all you tell me, and I mean to go on with my work."

'I was glad to hear her say this, for at least I should have the happiness of seeing her every day.

'"In a year's time," she went on, "my heart may feel a little less heavy, and I shall have had opportunity to reflect over your words. I cannot tell you what my answer may be, but if you are wise you will not hope. If you do not come to me then, I shall know that you have changed, and shall not blame you in the least. You are free to choose any one else. I have so little encouragement to give you that I shall not expect you to submit to this ordeal." But I think her firmness was a little shaken, and she looked at me rather timidly when I thanked her very quietly and said that at the time appointed I would speak to her again. I supposed she had not realised the strength of my feelings.

'Ursula, I was by no means hopeless. And as the months passed on my hopes grew.

'I saw her daily, and after the first awkwardness had passed we were good friends. But her manner changed insensibly. She was less frank with me; at times she was almost shy. I saw her change colour when I looked at her. She was quiet in my presence, and yet my coming pleased her. I thought it would be well with me when the time came for renewing my suit; but it seems that I was a blind fool.

'I had put down the exact date, May 7. It was last year, Ursula. I meant to adhere to the very day and hour; but before February closed my hopes had suffered eclipse.

'All at once Miss Hamilton's manner became cold and constrained, as you see it now. Her soft shyness, that had been so favourable a sign, disappeared entirely. She avoided me on every occasion. She seemed to fear to be alone with me a moment. Her nervousness was so visible and so distressing that I often left her in anger. A barrier—vague, and yet substantial—seemed built up between us.

'She began to neglect her work, and then to make excuses. She was overdone, and suffered from headache. The school-work tired her. You have heard it all, Ursula: I need not repeat it.

'One by one she dropped her duties. The parish knew her no more. She certainly looked ill. Her melancholy increased. Something was evidently preying on her mind.

'One day Miss Darrell spoke to me. She had been very kind, and had fed my hopes all this time. But now she was the bearer of bad news.

'She came to me in the study, while I was waiting for Hamilton. She looked very pale and discomposed, and asked if she might speak to me. She was very unhappy about me, but she did not think it right to let it go on. Gladys wanted me to know. And then it all came out.

'It could never be as I wished. Miss Hamilton had been trying all this time to like me, and once or twice she thought she had succeeded, but the feeling had never lasted for many days. I was not the right person. This was the substance of Miss Darrell's explanation.

'"You know Gladys," she went on, "how sensitive and affectionate her nature is; how she hates to inflict pain. She is working herself up into a fever at the thought that you will speak to her again.

'"'It was too terrible last time, Etta,' she said to me, bursting into tears. 'I cannot endure it again. How am I to tell him about Claude?'"

'"About Claude!" I almost shouted. Miss Darrell looked frightened at my violence. She shrank back, and turned still paler. I noticed her hands trembled.

'"Oh, have you not noticed?" she returned feebly. "Oh, what a cruel task this is! and you are so good,—so good."

'"Tell me what you mean!" I replied angrily, for I felt so savage at that moment that a word of sympathy was more than I could bear. You would not have known me at that moment, Ursula. I am not easily roused, as you know, but the blow was too sudden. I must have forgotten myself to have spoken to Miss Darrell in that tone. When I looked at her, her mouth was quivering like a frightened child's, and there were tears in her eyes.

'"I scarcely know that it is you," she faltered. "Are men all like that when their wills are crossed? It is not my fault that you are hurt in this way. And it is not Gladys's either. She has tried—I am sure she has tried her hardest—to bring herself to accede to your wishes. But a woman cannot always regulate her own heart."

'"You have mentioned Captain Hamilton's name," I returned coldly, for her words seemed only to aggravate and widen the sore. "Perhaps you will kindly explain what he has to do with the matter?"

'She hesitated, and looked at me in a pleading manner. I saw that she did not wish to speak; but for once I was inexorable.

'"I must rely upon your honour, then, not to repeat my words either to Giles or Gladys. Your doing so would bring Gladys into trouble; and, after all, there is nothing definitely settled." I nodded assent to this, and she went on rather reluctantly:

'"Claude was always fond of Gladys, but we never knew how much he admired her until he went away. They are only half-cousins. Gladys's father was step-brother to Claude's. Giles has always been averse to cousins marrying, but we thought this would make a difference."

'"They are engaged, then?" I asked, in a loud voice, that seemed to startle Miss Darrell.

'"Oh no, no," she returned eagerly; "there is no engagement at all. Claude writes to her, and she answers him, and I think

he is making way with her: she has owned as much to me. Gladys is not one to talk of her feelings, especially on this subject; but it is easy to see how absorbed she is in those Indian letters; she is always brighter and more like herself when she has heard from Claude."

'"I am to deduce from all this that you believe Captain Hamilton has a better chance of winning her affections than I?"

'Again she hesitated, then drew a foreign letter slowly from her pocket. "I think I must read you a sentence from his last letter: he often writes to me as well as to Gladys. Yes, here it is: 'Your last letter has been a great comfort to me, my dear Etta: it was more than a poor fellow had a right to expect. I do believe that this long absence has served my purpose, and the scratch I got at Singapore. Girls are curious creatures; one never can tell how to tackle them, and my special cousin knows how to keep one at a distance, but I begin to feel I am making way at last. She wrote to me very sweetly last mail. I carry that letter everywhere; there was a sweetness about it that gave me hope. If I can get leave,—though heaven knows when that will be,—I mean to come home and carry the breach boldly. I shall first show her my wound and my medal, and then throw myself at her pretty little feet. Gladys——" No, I must not read any more; you see how it is, Mr. Cunliffe?"

'"Yes, I see how it is," I returned slowly. "Forgive me if I have been impatient or unmindful of your kindness." And then I took up my hat and left the room, and it was weeks before I set foot in Gladwyn again.'

'Oh, Max! my poor Max!' I returned, stroking his hand softly. He did not take it away: he only looked at me with his kind smile

'That was Emmie's way,—her favourite little caress. Wait a moment, Ursula, my dear; I am going out for a breath of air.' And he stood in the porch for a few minutes, looking up at the winter sky seamed with stars, and then came back to me quietly, and waited for me to speak.

CHAPTER XXVIII

CROSSING THE RIVER

MAX waited for me to speak, but I had no words ready for the occasion. My silence seemed to perplex him.

'You have heard everything now, Ursula.'

'Yes, I suppose so. I am very sorry for you, Max; you have suffered cruelly. And this only happened last year?'

'Last February.'

'It is very strange,—very mysterious. I do not seem to understand it. I cannot find the clue to all this.'

'There is no clue needed,' he returned impatiently. 'Miss Hamilton is in love with her cousin, and is sorry for my disappointment.'

'I do not believe it,' I replied bluntly. And yet, as I said this, Gladys's conduct seemed to me perfectly inexplicable. It was just possible that Max's statement, after all, might be correct,—that she did not love him well enough to marry him: and this would account for her nervousness and constraint in his presence: a sensitive girl like Gladys would never be at her ease under such circumstances. But she had promised not to withdraw her friendship: why had she then given up her work and made herself a stranger to his dearest interest? I had seen her struggle with herself when he had begged her to resume her class. A brightness had come to her eyes, her manner had become warm and animated, as though the stirring of new life were in her veins, and then she had refused him very gently, and a certain dimness and blight had crept over her. I had wondered then at her.

No, I could not bring myself to believe that she was indifferent

to Max. He was so good, so worthy of her. And yet—and yet, do we women always choose the best? Perhaps, as Max said, she knew him too well for him to influence her fancy. Captain Hamilton's scars and medals might cast a glamour over her. Gladys was very impulsive and enthusiastic; perhaps Max was too quiet and gentle to take her heart by storm.

I had plenty of time for these reflections, for Max sat moodily silent after my blunt remark, but at last he said,—

'I am afraid I believe it, Ursula, and that is more to the purpose. Miss Darrell has dispelled my last hope.'

'You mean that Captain Hamilton's return speaks badly for your chances?'

'I have no chances,' very gloomily. 'I am out of the running. Miss Hamilton's message—for I suppose it was a message—was my final answer. She did not wish me to speak to her again.'

'Are you sure that she sent that message?'

'Am I sure that I am sitting here?' he answered, rather irritably. 'What have you got in your head, Ursula, my dear? You must not let personal dislike influence your better judgment. Perhaps Miss Darrell is not to my taste; I think her sometimes officious and wanting in delicacy; but I do not doubt her for a moment.'

'That is a pity,' I returned drily, 'for she is certainly not true; but all you men swear by her.' For I felt—heaven forgive me!—almost a hatred of this woman, unreasonable as it seemed; but women have these instincts sometimes, and Max had warned me against Miss Darrell from the first.

'I will be frank with you,' I continued, more quietly. 'I do not read between the lines: in other words, I do not understand Gladys's behaviour. It may be as you say; I do not wish to delude you with false hopes, my poor Max; Gladys may care more for Captain Hamilton than she does for you; but it seems to me that you acted wrongly on one point; you meant it for the best; but you ought to have spoken to Gladys yourself.'

'I wonder that you should say that, Ursula,' he returned, in rather a hurt voice. 'I may be weak about Miss Hamilton, but I am hardly as weak as that. Do you think me capable of persecuting the woman I love?'

'It would not be persecution,' I replied firmly, for I was determined to speak my mind on this point. 'Miss Darrell may have misconstrued her meaning: the truth loses by repetition:

she may have added to or diminished her words. A third person should never be mixed up in a love affair: trouble always comes of it. I think you were wrong, Max: you let yourself be managed by Miss Darrell. She has nothing to do with you or Gladys.'

'I could not help it if she came to me.'

'True, she thrust herself in between you. Well, it is too late to speak of that now. If you will take my advice, Max,' for the thought had come upon me like a flash of inspiration, 'you will go down to Bournemouth and speak to Gladys, keeping your own counsel and telling no one of your intention.'

I saw Max stare at me as though he thought I had lost my senses, and then a sudden light came into his eyes.

'You will go down to Bournemouth,' I went on, 'and the Maberleys will be glad to see you; you are an old friend, and they will ask no questions and think no ill. You will have no difficulty in seeing Gladys alone. Speak to her promptly and frankly; ask her what her behaviour has meant, and if she really prefers her cousin. If you must know the worst, it will be better to know it now, and from her own lips. Do go, Max, like a brave man.' But even before I finished speaking, the light had died out of his eyes, and his manner had resumed its old sadness.

'No, Ursula; you mean well, but it will not do. I cannot persecute her in this way. Captain Hamilton is coming home in July: she has given him permission to come. I will wait for that. I shall very soon see how matters stand between them. I shall only need to see her with him; probably I shall not speak to her at all.'

I could have wrung my hands over Max's obstinacy and quixotism: he carried his generosity to a fault. Few men would be so patient and forbearing.

How could he stand aside hopelessly and let another man win his prize? But perhaps he considered it was already won. I pleaded with him again. I even went so far as to contradict my theory about a third person, and offered to sound Gladys about her cousin; but he silenced me peremptorily.

'Promise me that you will do nothing of the kind; give me your word of honour, Ursula, that you will respect my confidence. Good heavens! if I thought that you would betray me, and to her of all people, I should indeed bitterly repent my trust in you.'

Max was so agitated, he spoke so angrily, that I hastened to soothe him. Of course his confidence was sacred; how could he think such things of me? I was not like Miss—— But here I pulled myself up. He might be as blind and foolish as he liked, he might commit suicide and I would not hinder him; he should enjoy his misery in his own way. And more to that effect.

'Now I have made you cross, little she-bear,' he said, laying his hand on mine, 'and you have been so patient and have given my woes such a comfortable hearing. You frightened me for a moment, for I know how quick and impulsive you can be. No, no, my dear. I hold you to your own words: a third person must not be mixed up in a love affair; it only brings trouble.'

'You have proved the truth of my words,' I remarked coolly. 'Very well, I suppose I must forgive you; only never do it again, on your peril: you know I am to be trusted.'

'To be sure; you are as true as steel, Ursula.'

'Very well, then: in that case you have nothing to fear. I will be wise and wary for your sake, and guard your honour sacredly as my own; if I can give you a gleam of hope, I will. Anyhow, I shall watch.'

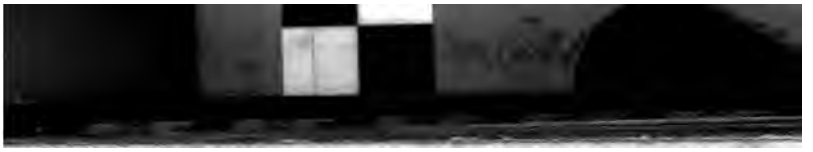
'Thank you, dear. And now we will not talk any more about it; now you know why I wanted you to be her friend. I am glad to think she is so fond of you.' But I would not let him change the subject just yet.

'Max,' I said, detaining him, for he rose to go, 'all this is dreadfully hard for you. Shall you go away—if—if—this happens?'

'No,' he returned quietly; 'it is they who will go away. Captain Hamilton cannot leave his regiment: he is far too fond of an active life. It will be dreary enough, God knows, but it will not be harder than the life I have led these twelve months, trying to win her back to her work and to put myself in the background. It has worn me out, Ursula. I could not stand that sort of thing much longer. It is a relief to me that she is away.'

'Yes, I can understand this.'

'It makes one think, after all, that the extreme party have something in their argument in favour of the celibacy of the clergy. Not that I hold with them, for all that; but all this sort of thing takes the heart out of a man, and comes between



him and his work. I should be a better priest if I were a happier man, Ursula.'

'I doubt that, Max.' And the tears rose to my eyes, for I knew how good he was, and what a friend to his people.

'My dear, I differ from you. I believe there is no work like happy work,—work done by a heart at leisure from itself; but of course we clergy and laity must take what heaven sends us.' And then he held out his hands to me, and I suppose he saw how unhappy I was for his sake.

'Don't fret about me, my dear little Ursula,' he said kindly. 'The back gets fitted for the burden, and by this time I have grown accustomed to my pain; it will all be right some day: I shall not be blamed up there for loving her.' And he left me with a smile.

I passed a miserable evening thinking of Max. Next to Charlie, he had been my closest friend from girlhood; I had been accustomed to look to him for advice in all my difficulties, to rely upon his counsel. I knew that people who were comparatively strangers to him thought he was almost too easy-going, and a little weak from excess of good-nature. He was too tolerant of other folk's failings; they said he preached mercy where severity would be more bracing and wholesome; and no doubt they thought that he judged himself as leniently; but they did not know Max.

I never knew a man harder to himself. Charitable to others, he had no self-pity; selfish aims were impossible to him. He who could not endure to witness even a child or an animal suffer, would have plucked out his right eye or parted with his right hand, in gospel phrase, if by doing so he could witness to the truth or spare pain to a weaker human being. It was this knowledge of his inner life that made Max so priestly in my eyes. I knew he was pure enough and strong enough to meet even Gladys's demands. Nothing but a modern Bayard would ever satisfy her fastidious taste; she would not look on a man's stature, or on his outward beauty; such things would seem paltry to her; but he who aspired to be her lord and master must be worthy of all reverence and must have won his spurs: so much had I learnt from my friendship with Gladys.

I pondered over Max's words, and tried to piece the fragments of our conversation with recollections of my talks with Gladys. I recalled much that had passed. I endeavoured to find the clue to her downcast, troubled looks, her quenched and

listless manner. I felt dimly that some strange misunderstanding wrapped these two in a close fog. What had brought about this chill, murky atmosphere, in which they failed to recognise each other's meaning? This was the mystery: lives had often been shipwrecked from these miserable misunderstandings, for want of a word. I felt completely baffled, and before the evening was over I could have cried with the sense of utter failure and bewilderment. If Max's chivalrous scruples had not tied my hands, I would have gone to Gladys boldly and asked her what it all meant; I would have challenged her truth; I would have compelled her to answer me; but I dared not break my promise. By letter and in the spirit I would respect Max's wishes.

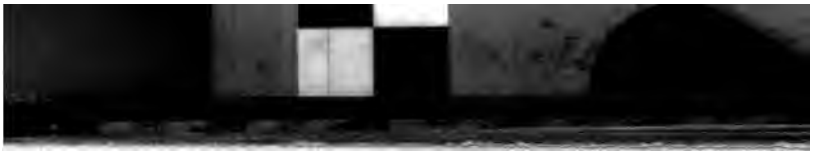
But I resolved to watch: no eyes should be so vigilant as mine. I was determined that nothing should escape my scrutiny; at least I was in possession of certain facts that would help me in finding the clue I wanted. I knew now that Max loved Gladys and had tried to win her: that he had nearly done so was also evident. What had wrought that sudden change? Had Captain Hamilton's brilliant successes really dazzled her fancy and blinded her to Max's quiet unobtrusive virtues? Did she really and truly prefer her cousin? This was what I had to find out, and here Max could not help me.

There was one thing I was glad to know,—that Mr. Hamilton favoured Max's suit. At least I should not be working against him. I do not know why, but the thought of doing so would have pained me: I no longer wished to array myself for war against Mr. Hamilton; my enmity had died a natural death for want of fuel.

I felt grateful to him for his kindness to Max; no doubt he had a fellow-feeling with him. That dear old gossip, Mrs. Maberley, had told me something about Mr. Hamilton on my second visit that had made me feel very sorry for him. Max knew about it, of course; he had said a word to me once on the subject, but it was not Max's way to gossip about his neighbours; he once said, laughing, that he left all the choice bits of scandal to his good old friend at Maplehurst.

It was from Mrs. Maberley that I heard all about Mr. Hamilton's disappointment, and why he had not married. When he was about eight-and-twenty he had been engaged to a young widow.

'She was a beautiful creature, my dear,' observed the old lady; 'the colonel said he had never seen a handsomer woman.



She was an Irish beauty, and had those wonderful gray eyes and dark eyelashes that make you wonder what colour they are, and she had the sweetest smile possible; any man would have been bewitched by it. I never saw a young man more in love than Giles: when he came here he could talk of nothing but Mrs. Carrick: her name was Ella, I remember. Well, it went on for some months, and he was preparing for the wedding,—there was to be a nursery got ready, for she had one little boy, and Giles already doted on the child,—when all at once there came a letter from his lady-love; and a very pretty letter it was. Giles must forgive her, it said, she was utterly wretched at the thought of the pain she was giving him, but she was mistaken in the strength of her attachment. She had come to the conclusion that they would not be happy together, that in fact she preferred some one else.

'She did not mention that this other lover was richer than Giles and had a title, but of course he found out that this was the case. The fickle Irish beauty had caught the fancy of an elderly English nobleman with a large family of grown-up sons and daughters. My dear, it was a very heartless piece of work: it changed Giles completely. He never spoke about it to any one, but if ever a man was heart-broken, Giles was: he was never the same after that; it made him hard and bitter; he is always railing against women, or saying disagreeable home-truths about them. And of course Mrs. Carrick, or rather Lady Howe, is to blame for that. Oh, my dear, she may deck herself with diamonds, as they say she does, and call herself happy,—which she is not, with a gouty, ill-tempered old husband who is jealous of her,—but I'll be bound she thinks of Giles sometimes with regret, and scorns herself for her folly.'

Poor Mr. Hamilton! And this had all happened about six or seven years ago. No wonder he looked stern and said bitter things. He was not naturally sweet-tempered, like Max; such a misfortune would sour him.

'Ah well,' I said to myself, as I went up to bed, 'it is perfectly true what Longfellow says, "Into each life some rain must fall, some days must be dark and dreary"; but it is strange that they both have suffered. It is a good thing, perhaps, that such an experience is never likely to happen to me. There is some consolation to be deduced even from my want of beauty: no man will fall in love with me and then play me false.' And with that a curious feeling came over me, a sudden

inexplicable sense of want and loneliness, something I could not define, that took no definite shape and had no similitude, and yet haunted me with a sense of ill; but the next moment I was struggling fiercely with the unknown and unwelcome guest.

'For shame!' I said to myself; 'this is weakness and pure selfishness, mere sentimental feverishness; this is not like the strong-minded young person Miss Darrell calls me. What if loneliness be appointed me?—we must each have our cross. Perhaps, as life goes on and I grow older, it may be a little hard to bear at times, but my loneliness would be better than the sort of pain Mr. Hamilton and Max have endured.' And as I thought this, a sudden conviction came to me that I could not have borne a like fate, a dim instinct that told me that I should suffer keenly and long,—that it would be better, far better, that the deepest instincts of my woman's nature should never be roused than be kindled only to die away into ashes, as many women's affections have been suffered to die. 'Anything but that,' I said to myself, with a sudden thrill of pain that surprised me with its intensity.

All this time through the long cold weeks Elspeth had been slowly dying. Quietly and gradually the blind woman's strength had ebbed and lessened, until early in March we knew she could not last much longer.

She suffered no pain, and uttered no complaint. She lay peacefully propped up with pillows on the bed where Mary Marshall had breathed her last, and her pale wrinkled face grew almost as white as the cap-border that encircled it.

At the commencement of her illness I was unable to be much with her. Susan and Phœbe Locke had thoroughly engrossed me, and a hurried visit morning and evening to give Peggy orders was all that was possible under the circumstances; but I saw that she was well cared for and comfortable, and Peggy was very good to her and kept the children out of the room.

'Ah, my bairn, I am dying like a lady,' she said to me one day, 'and it is good to be here on poor Mary's bed. See the fine clean sheets that Peggy has put me on, and the grand quilt that keeps my feet warm! Sometimes I could cry with the comfort of it all; and there is the broth and the jelly always ready; and what can a poor old body want more?'

When Susan was convalescent I spent more time with Elspeth. I knew she loved to have me beside her, and to listen to the chapters and Psalms I read to her. She would

ask me to sing sometimes, and often we would sit and talk of the days that seemed so 'few and evil' in the light of advancing immortality.

'Ay, dearie,' she would say, 'it is not much to look back upon except in an angel's sight,—a poor old woman's life, who worked and struggled to keep her master and children from clemming. I used to think it hard sometimes that I could not get to church on Sunday morning,—for I was aye a woman for church,—but I had to stand at my wash-tub often until late on Saturday night. "After a day's charing, rinsing out the children's bits of things, and ironing them too, how is a poor tired body like me to get religion?" I would say sometimes when I was fairly moithered with it all. But, Miss Garston, my dear, I'm glad, as I lie here, to know that I never neglected the children God had given me; and so He took care of all that; He knew when I was too tired to put up a prayer that it was not for the want of loving Him.'

'No, indeed, Elspeth. I often think we ought not to be too hard on poor people.'

'That's true,' brightening up visibly. 'He is no severe taskmaster demanding bricks out of stubble; He knows poor labouring people are often tired and out of heart. I used to say to my master sometimes, "Ah well, we must leave all that for heaven; we shall have a fine rest there, and plenty of time to sing our hymns and talk to the Lord Jesus. He was a labouring man too, and He will know all about it." I often comforted my master like that.'

Elspeth's quaint talk interested me greatly. I grew to love her dearly, and I liked to feel that she was fond of me in return. I could have sat by her contentedly for hours, holding her hard work-worn hand and listening to her gentle flow of talk with its Scriptural phrases and simple realistic thoughts. It was like washing some pilgrim's feet at a feast to listen to Elspeth.

One evening she told me that she had been thinking of me.

'I wanted to know what you were like, my bairn,' she said, with her pretty Scotch accent; 'and the doctor came in as I was turning it over in my mind, so I made bold to ask him to describe you. I thought he was a long time answering, and at last he said, "What put that into your head, granny?" as if he were a little bit taken aback by the question.

'"Well, doctor," I returned, "we all of us like to see the faces of those we love; and I am all in the dark. That dear

young lady is doing the Lord's work with all her might, and she has a voice that makes me think of heaven, and the choirs of angels, and the golden harps, and maybe her face is as beautiful as her voice."

'"Oh no," he says quite sharply to that, "she is not beautiful at all: indeed, I am not sure that most people would not think her plain."

'I suppose I was an old ninny, but I did not like to hear him say this, my bairn, for I knew it could not be the truth; but he went on after a minute,—

'"It is not easy to describe the face of a person one knows so well. I find it difficult to answer your question. Miss Garston has such a true face, one seems to trust it in a minute: it is the face of an honest kindly woman who will never do you any harm"; and then I saw what he meant. Why, bairn, the angels have this sort of beauty, and it lasts the longest; that is the sort of face they have there.'

I heard all this silently, and was thankful that Elspeth's blind eyes could not see the burning flush of mortification that rose to my face. The dear garrulous old body, how could she have put such a question to Mr. Hamilton? and yet how kindly he had answered! A sudden recollection of Irish dark-gray eyes with black lashes came to my mind; I knew Mr. Hamilton was a connoisseur of beauty. I had often heard him describe people, and point out their physical defects with the keenest criticism; he was singularly fastidious on this point; but, in spite of my humiliation, I was glad to know that he had spoken so gently. He had told the truth simply, that was all: at least he had owned I was true; I must content myself with this tribute to my honesty.

But it was some days before I could recall Elspeth's words without a sensation of prickly heat: it is strange how painfully these little pin-pricks to our vanity affect us. I was angry with myself for remembering them, and yet they rankled, in spite of Elspeth's quaint and homely consolation. Alas! I was not better than my fellows: Ursula Garston was not the strong-minded woman that Miss Darrell called her.

But when I next met Mr. Hamilton I had other thoughts to engross me, for Elspeth was dying, and we were standing together by her bedside. I had not sent for Mr. Hamilton, for I knew that he could do nothing more for her; but he had met one of the children in the village, and on hearing the end was approach-

ing had come at once to render me any help in his power. Perhaps he thought I should like to have him there.

Elspeth's pinched wrinkled face brightened as she heard his voice. 'Ay, doctor, I am glad to know you are there; you have been naught but kind to me all these years, and now, thanks to this bairn, I am dying like a lady. The Lord bless you both! and He will,—He will!' with feeble earnestness.

I bent down and kissed her cold cheek. 'Never mind us, Elspeth: only tell us that all is well with you. You are not afraid, dear granny?'

'What's to fear, my bairn, with the Lord holding my hand?—and He will not let go; ah no, He will never let go! Ay, I have come to the dark river, but it will not do more than wet my feet. I'll be carried over, for I am old and weak,—old and weak, my dearie.' These were her last words, and half an hour afterwards the change came, and Elspeth's sightless eyes were opened to the light of immortality.

That night I took up a little worn copy of the *Pilgrim's Progress* that I had had from childhood, and opened it at a favourite passage, where Christian and his companion are talking with the shining ones as they went up towards the Celestial city, and I thought of Elspeth as I read it. 'You are going now,' said they, 'to the paradise of God, wherein you shall see the Tree of Life, and eat of the never-failing fruit thereof; and when you come there you shall have white robes given you, and your walk and talk shall be every day with the King, even all the days of eternity. There you shall not see again such things as you saw when you were in the lower regions, upon the earth, to wit, sorrow, sickness, and death, for the former things are passed away. . . .

'And the men asked, "What must we do in that holy place?" To whom it was answered, "You must then receive the comfort of your toil, and have joy for all your sorrow."' I thought of Elspeth's last words, 'Old and weak,—old and weak, my dearie.' Surely they had come true: those aged feet had barely touched the cold water. Gently and tenderly she had been carried across to the green pastures and still waters in the paradise of God.

CHAPTER XXIX

MISS DARRELL HAS A HEADACHE

I BEGAN to feel that Gladys had been away a long time, and to wish for her return. I was much disappointed, then, on receiving a letter from her about a fortnight after Elspeth's death, telling me that Colonel Maberley had made up his mind to spend Easter in Paris, and that she had promised to accompany them.

'I shall be sorry to be so long without your companionship,' she wrote. 'I miss you more than I can say; but I am sure that it is far better for me to remain away as long as possible: the change is certainly doing me good. I am quite strong and well: they spoil me dreadfully, but I think this sort of treatment suits me best.'

It was a long letter, and seemed to be written in a more cheerful mood than usual. There was a charming description of a trip they had taken, with little graceful touches of humour here and there.

I handed the letter silently to Max when he called the next day. I thought that it would be no harm to show it to him. He took it to the window, and was so busy reading it that I had half finished a letter I was writing to Jill before he at last laid it down on my desk.

'Thank you for letting me see it,' he said quietly: 'it has been a great pleasure. Somehow, as I read it, it seemed as though the old Gladys Hamilton had written it,—not the one we know now. Indeed, she seems much better.'

'Yes, and we must make up our minds to do without her,' I answered, with a sigh.

'And we shall do so most willingly,' he returned, with a sort

of tacit rebuke to my selfishness, 'if we know the change is benefiting her.' And then, with a change of tone, 'What a beautiful handwriting hers is, Ursula!—so firm and clear, so characteristic of the writer. Does she often write you such long, interesting letters? You are much to be envied, my dear. Well, well, the day's work is waiting for me.' And with that he went off, without saying another word.

My next visitor was Mr. Hamilton. He came to tell me of an accident case. A young labourer had fallen off a scaffolding, and a compound fracture of the right arm had been the result. He was also badly shaken and bruised, and was altogether in a miserable plight.

I promised, of course, to go to him at once; but he told me that there was no immediate hurry; he had attended to the arm and left him very comfortable, and he would do well for the next hour or two; and, as Mr. Hamilton seemed inclined to linger for a little chat, I could not refuse to oblige him.

'It is just as well that this piece of work has come to me,' I said presently, 'for I was feeling terribly idle. Since Elspeth's death I have not had a single case, and have employed my leisure in writing long letters to my relations and taking country rambles with Tinker.'

'That is right,' he returned heartily. 'I am sure we worked you far too hard at one time.'

'It did not hurt me, and I should not care to be idle for long.—Yes, I have heard from Gladys,' for his eyes fell on the open letter that lay beside us. 'I am rather disappointed that I shall not see her before I go away.'

'Are you going away, then?' he asked, very quickly, and I thought the news did not seem to please him.

'Not for three weeks. I hope my patient will be getting on by that time, and will be able to spare me: at any rate, I can give his mother a lesson or two. You know my cousin is to be married, and I have promised to help Aunt Philippa.'

'How long do you think you will be away?' he demanded, with a touch of his old abruptness.

'For a fortnight. I could not arrange for less. Sara is making such a point of it.'

'A whole fortnight! I am afraid you are terribly idle, after all, Miss Garston. You are growing tired of this humdrum place. You are yearning for "the leeks and cucumbers of Egypt,"' with a grim smile.

'You are wrong,' I returned, with more earnestness than the occasion warranted. 'I feel a strange reluctance to re-enter Vanity Fair. The splendours of a gay wedding are not to my taste. Sara tells me that her reception after the ceremony will be attended by about two hundred guests. To me the idea is simply barbarous. I expect I shall be heartily glad to get back to Heathfield.'

I was surprised to see how pleased Mr. Hamilton looked at this speech. I had been thinking of my work and my quiet little parlour, not of Gladwyn, when I spoke; but he seemed to accept it as a personal compliment.

'I assure you that we shall welcome you back most gladly,' he returned. 'The place will not seem like itself without our busy village nurse. Well, you have worked hard enough for six months: you deserve a holiday. I should like to see you in your butterfly garb, Miss Garston. I fancy, however, that I should not recognise you.'

With a sudden pang I remembered Elspeth's words. He does not think that such home attire will become me. I thought he preferred me in my usual nun's garb of black serge.

'Oh,' I said, petulantly and foolishly, 'I must own that I shall look rather like a crow dressed up in peacock's feathers in the grand gown Sara has chosen for me'; but I was a little taken aback, and felt inclined to laugh, when he asked me, with an air of interest, what it was like in colour and material.

'Sara wished it to be red plush,' I replied demurely; 'but I refused to wear it; so she has waived that in favour of a dark green velvet. I think it is absolutely wicked to make Uncle Brian pay for such a dress; but it seems that Sara will get her own way, so I must put up with all they choose to give me.'

'That is hardly spoken graciously. If your uncle be rich, why should he not please himself in buying you a velvet gown? I think the fair bride-elect has good taste. You will look very well in dark-green velvet: light tints would not suit you at all! red would be too gay.'

He spoke with such gravity and decision that I thought it best not to contradict him. I even repressed my inclination to laugh: if he liked to be dogmatic on the subject of my dress, I would not hinder him. The next moment, however, he dismissed the matter.

'I agree with you in disliking gay weddings. The idea is singularly repugnant to me. Because two people elect to join

hands for the journey of life, is there any adequate reason why all their idle acquaintances should accompany them with cymbals and prancings and all sorts of fooleries just at the most solemn moment of their life?'

'I suppose they wish to express their sympathy,' I returned.

'Sympathy should wear a quieter garb. These folks come to church to show their fine feathers and make a fuss; they do not care a jot for the solemnity of the service; and yet to me it is as awful in its way as the burial service. "Till death us do part,"—can any one, man or woman, say these words lightly and not bring down a doom upon himself?' He spoke with suppressed excitement, walking up and down the room: one could see how strongly he felt his words. Was he thinking of Mrs. Carrick? I wondered. He gave a slight shudder, as though some unwelcome thought obtruded itself, and then he turned to me with a forced smile.

'I am boring you, I am afraid. I get horribly excited over the shams of conventionality. What were we talking about? Oh, I remember: Gladys's letter. Yes, she has written to Lady Betty, but not such a volume as that,' glancing at the closely written sheets. 'You are her chief correspondent, I believe; but she told us her plans. For my part, I am glad that she should enjoy this trip to Paris. Really, the Maberleys are most kind. I sent her a cheque to add to her amusements, for of course all girls like shopping.'

How generous he was to his sisters! with all his faults of manner, he seemed to grudge them nothing. But all the same I knew Gladys would have valued a few kind words from him far more than the cheque; but perhaps he had written to her as well. But he seemed rather surprised when I asked him the question.

'Oh no; I never write to my sisters: they would not care for a letter from me. Etta offered to enclose it in a letter she had just finished to Gladys, so that saved all trouble. By the bye, Miss Garston, I hope you will come up to Gladwyn one evening before you leave Heathfield. I do not see why we are to be deserted in this fashion.'

Neither did I, if he put it in this way: reluctant as I was to spend an evening there in Gladys's absence, it certainly was not quite kind either to him or to Lady Betty to refuse. He seemed to anticipate a refusal, however, for he said hastily,—

'Never mind answering me now. Etta shall write to you

in proper form, and you shall fix your own evening. Now I have hindered you sufficiently, so I will take my leave,'— which he did, but I heard him some time afterwards talking to Nathaniel in the porch.

A few days after this I received a civil little note from Miss Darrell, pressing me to spend a long evening with them, and begging me to bring my prettiest songs.

I made the rather lame excuse that I was much engaged with my new patient, and fixed the latest day that I could,— the very last evening before I was to leave for London. Mr. Hamilton met me a few hours afterwards, and asked me rather drily what my numerous engagements could be.

'You are the most unsociable of your sex,' he added, when I had no answer to make to this. 'I shall take care that you are properly punished, for neither Cunliffe nor Tudor shall be asked to meet you. Etta was sure you would like one or both to come, but I put my veto on it at once.'

'Then you were very disagreeable,' I returned laughingly. 'I wanted Uncle Max very much.' But he only shook his head at me good-humouredly, and scolded me for my want of amiability.

I determined, when the evening came, that he should not find fault with me in any way. I was rather in holiday mood; my patient was going on well, and his mother was a neat, capable body, and might be trusted to look after him. No other cases had come to me, and I might leave Heathfield with a clear conscience. Uncle Max would miss me, but an old college friend was coming to stay at the vicarage, so I could be better spared. I had seen a great deal of Mr. Tudor lately. I often met him in the village, and he always turned back and walked with me: he met me on this occasion, and walked to the gates of Gladwyn. Indeed, he detained me for some minutes in the road, trying to extract particulars about the wedding.

'Miss Jocelyn is to be bridesmaid, then?' describing a circle with his stick in the dust.

'Yes. Poor Sara is afraid that she will be quite overshadowed by Jill's bigness; she has made her promise not to stand quite close. They have got a match for her. Grace Underley is as tall as Jill, and very fair. Sara calls them her night and morning bridesmaids.'

'I think I shall be in London on the fourteenth. I thought, Miss Garston, that there was a prejudice to weddings in May.'

'Yes; but Sara laughs at the idea, and Colonel Ferguson says it is all nonsense. I did not know you were coming to town so soon.'

'Some of my people will be up then,' he said absently. 'Perhaps I shall have a peep at you all; but of course'—rather hastily—'I shall not call at Hyde Park Gate until the wedding is over.'

I wished he would not call then. What was the good of feeding his boyish fancy? it would soon die a natural death, if he would only be wise. Poor Mr. Tudor! I began to be afraid that he was very much in earnest after all: there was a grave expression on his face as he turned away. Perhaps he knew, as I did, that our big awkward Jill would develop into a splendid woman; that one of these days Jocelyn Garston would be far more admired than her sister; that the ugly duckling would soon change into a swan. There were times even now when Jill looked positively handsome, if only her short black locks would grow, and if she would leave off hunching her shoulders.

'I should like Lawrence Tudor to have my Jill, if he were only rich; but there is no hope for him now, poor fellow!' I said to myself, as I walked up the gravel walk towards the house.

Gladwyn looked its best this evening. The shady little lawns that surrounded the house looked cool and inviting; the birds were singing merrily from the avenue of young oaks; the air was sweet with the scent of May-blossoms and wall-flowers: great bunches of them were placed in the hall.

Thornton, who admitted me, said that Leah would be waiting for me in the blue room, as Miss Darrell's room was called; so I went up at once.

I was passing through the dressing-room, when I saw the bedroom door was half opened, and a voice—I scarcely recognised it as Miss Darrell's, it was so different from her usual low, toneless voice—exclaimed angrily, 'You forget yourself strangely, Leah! one would think you were the mistress and I the maid, to hear you speaking to me.'

'I can't help that, Miss Etta,' returned the woman insolently 'If you are not more punctual in your payments I will go to the master myself and tell him.' But here I knocked sharply at the door to warn them of my presence, and Leah ceased abruptly, while Miss Darrell bade me enter.

She tried to meet me as usual, but her face was flushed, and

she looked at me uneasily, as though she feared that I had overheard Leah's speech. I thought Leah looked sullen and stolid as she waited upon me. It was a most forbidding face. I was glad when Miss Darrell dismissed her on some slight pretext.

'Leah is in a bad temper this evening,' she observed, examining the clasp of a handsome bracelet as she spoke. I noticed then that she had beautiful arms, as well as finely-shaped hands, and the emerald-eyed snake showed to advantage. 'She is a most invaluable person, but she can take liberties sometimes. Perhaps you heard me scolding her; but I consider she was decidedly in the wrong.'

'She does not look very good-tempered,' was my reply.

Miss Darrell still looked flushed and perturbed; but she took up her fan and vinaigrette, and proposed that we should join Lady Betty in the drawing-room. Leah was in the hall. As we passed her she addressed Miss Darrell.

'If you can spare me a moment, ma'am, I should like to speak to you,' she said, quite civilly; but I thought her manner a little menacing.

'Will not another time do, Leah?' returned her mistress in a worried tone; but the next moment she begged me to go in without her.

Lady Betty was sitting by the open window with Nap beside her. I thought the poor little girl looked dull and lonely. She gave an exclamation of pleasure at seeing me, and ran towards me with outstretched hands. She looked like a child in her little white gown and blue ribbons, with her short curly hair.

'I am so glad to see you, Miss Garston! I thought Etta would keep you. I have been alone all the afternoon: Etta never sits with me now. How I wish Gladys would come back! I have no one to speak to, and I miss her horribly.'

'Poor Lady Betty!'

'You would say so, if you knew how horrid it all was. Just now, as I was sitting alone, I felt like a poor little princess shut up in an enchanted tower. Giles is the magician, and Etta is the wicked witch. I was making up quite a story about it.'

'Why have you not been to see me lately, Lady Betty?'

'Oh, how silly you are to ask me such a question!' she returned pettishly. 'You had better ask Witch Etta. Now you pretend to look surprised. She won't let me come—there!

'My dear child, surely you need not consult your cousin.'

'Of course not,' wrinkling her forehead; 'but then, you see, Witch Etta consults me: she makes a point of finding out all my little plans and nipping them in the bud. She says she really cannot allow me to go so often to the White Cottage; Mr. Cunliffe and Mr. Tudor are always there, and it is not proper. She is always hinting that I want to meet Mr. Tudor, and it is no good telling her that I never think of such a thing.' Lady Betty was half crying. A more innocent, harmless little soul never breathed; she had not a spice of coquetry in her nature. I felt indignant at such an accusation.

'It is all nonsense, Lady Betty,' I returned sharply. 'Mr. Tudor has not called at the cottage more than once since Jill left me, and then Uncle Max sent him. When I first came to Heathfield he was very kind in doing me little services, and he dropped in two or three times when Jill was with me; but indeed he has never been a constant visitor. When we meet it is at the vicarage or in the street.'

'You would never convince Etta of that,' replied Lady Betty disconsolately. 'She has even told Giles how often Mr. Tudor goes to the cottage, and she has got it into her head that I am always trying to meet him there. It is such an odious idea, only worthy of Etta herself!' went on the little girl indignantly. 'If I could only make her hold her tongue to Giles!'

'I would not trouble about it if I were you, dear. No one who knows you would believe it. Such an idea would never occur to Mr. Tudor; he is an honest, simple young fellow, who is not ashamed to respect women in the good old-fashioned way.'

'Oh yes, I like him, and so does Jill; but I wish he were a thousand miles off, and then Etta would give me a little peace. How angry Gladys would be if she knew it! But I don't mean to trouble her about my small worries, poor darling.'

I had never heard Lady Betty speak with such womanly dignity. She was so often childish and whimsical that one never expected her to be grave and responsible like other people. She kissed me presently, and said I had done her good, and would I always believe in her in spite of Etta, for she was not the giddy little creature that Etta made her out to be; she was sure Giles would think more of her but for Etta's mischief-making.

Mr. Hamilton came in after this, and sat down by us, but Miss Darrell did not make her appearance until the gong sounded, and then she hurried in with a breathless apology. I do not know what made me watch her so closely all dinner-time. She took very little part in the conversation, seemed absent and thoughtful, and started nervously when Mr. Hamilton spoke to her. He told her once that she looked pale and tired, and she said then that the evening was close, and that her head ached. I wondered then if the headache had made her eyes so heavy, or if she had been crying.

Mr. Hamilton was a little quiet, too, through dinner, but listened with great interest when Lady Betty and I talked about the approaching wedding. I had to satisfy her curiosity on many points,—the bride's and bridesmaids' dresses, and the programme for the day.

The details did not seem to bore Mr. Hamilton. His face never once wore its cynical expression; but when we returned to the drawing-room, and Lady Betty wanted to continue the subject, he took her quietly by the shoulders and marched her off to Miss Darrell.

'Make the child hold her tongue, Etta,' he said good-humouredly. 'I want to coax Miss Garston to sing to us.' And then he came to me with the smile I liked best to see on his face, and held out his hand.

I was quite willing to oblige him, and he kept me hard at work for nearly an hour, first asking me if I were tired, and then begging for one more song; and sometimes I thought of Gladys as I sang, and sometimes of Max, and once of Mrs. Carrick, with her wonderful gray eyes, and her false fair face.

When I had finished I saw Mr. Hamilton looking at me rather strangely.

'Why do you sing such sad songs?' he asked, in a low voice, as though he did not wish to be overheard; but he need not have been afraid: Miss Darrell was evidently taking no notice of any one just then. She was lying back in her chair with her eyes closed, and I noticed afterwards that her forehead was lined like an old woman's.

'I like melancholy songs,' was my reply, and I fingered the notes a little nervously, for his look was rather too keen just then, and I had been thinking of Mrs. Carrick.

'But you are not melancholy,' he persisted. 'There is no weak sentimentality in your nature. Just now there was a

passion in your voice that startled me, as though you were drawing from some secret well.' He paused, and then went on, half playfully,—

'If I were like the Hebrew steward, and asked you to let down your pitcher and give me a draught, I wonder what you would answer?'

'That would depend on circumstances. You would find it difficult to persuade me that you were thirsty, or needed anything that I could give.'

'Would it be so difficult as all that?' he returned thoughtfully. 'I thought we were better friends; that you had penetrated beneath the upper crust; that in spite of my faults you trusted me a little.'

His earnestness troubled me. I hardly knew what he meant.

'Of course we are friends,' I answered hastily. 'I can trust you more than a little.' And I would have risen from my seat, but he put his hand gently on my sleeve.

'Wait a moment. You are going away, and I may not have another opportunity. I want to tell you something. You have done me good; you have taught me that women can be trusted, after all. I thank you most heartily for that lesson.'

'I do not know what you mean,' I faltered; but I felt a singular pleasure at these words. 'I have done nothing. It is you that have been good to me.'

'Pshaw!' impatiently. 'I thought you more sensible than to say that. Now, I want you,' his voice softening again, 'to try and think better of me; not to judge by appearances, or to take other people's judgments, but to be as true and charitable to me as you are to others. Promise me this before you go, Miss Garston.'

I do not know why the tears started to my eyes. I could hardly answer him.

'Will you try to do this?' he persisted, stooping over me.

'Yes,' was my scarcely audible answer, but he was satisfied with that monosyllable. He walked away after that, and joined Lady Betty. Miss Darrell had not moved; she still lay back on the cushions, and I thought her face looked drawn and old. When I spoke to her, for it was getting late, she roused herself with difficulty.

'My head is very bad, and I shall have to go to bed, after all,' she said, giving me her hand. 'I am afraid your beautiful

singing has been thrown away on me, for I was half asleep. I thought I heard you and Giles talking by the piano, but I was not sure.'

Mr. Hamilton walked home with me. He had resumed his usual manner; he told me he had had a letter that day that would oblige him to go to Edinburgh for a week or so.

'I think I shall take the night mail to-morrow evening, though it will give me a busy day: so, after all, I shall not miss you, Miss Garston.' And after a little more talk about the business that had summoned him, we reached the White Cottage and he bade me good-bye.

'I hope you will have a pleasant holiday. Take care of yourself, for all our sakes.' And with that he left me.

It was long before I slept that night. I felt confused and feverish, as though I were on the brink of some discovery that would overwhelm and alarm me. I could not understand myself or Mr. Hamilton. His words presented an enigma. I felt troubled by them, and yet not unhappy.

Had Miss Darrell overheard him? I wondered. I felt, if she had done so, her manner would have been different. She seemed jealous of her cousin, and always monopolised his words and looks. He had never spoken to me a dozen words in her presence that she had not tried to interrupt us. Had she really been asleep? These doubts kept recurring to me. Just before I fell asleep a remembrance of Leah's sullen face came between me and my dreams. Her insolent voice rang in my ears. What had she meant by her words? Why had Miss Darrell submitted to her impertinence? Was she afraid of Leah, as Gladys said? I began to feel weary of all these mysteries.

CHAPTER XXX

WITH TIMBRELS AND DANCES

AUNT PHILIPPA and Sara came to meet me at Victoria. They both seemed unfeignedly glad to see me.

Aunt Philippa was certainly a kind-hearted woman. Her faults were those that were engendered by too much prosperity. Overmuch ease and luxury had made her lymphatic and indolent. Except for Ralph's death, she had never known sorrow. Care had not yet traced a single line on her smooth forehead; it looked as open and unfurrowed as a child's. Contentment and a comfortable self-complacency were written on her comely face. Just now it beamed with motherly welcome. Somehow, I never felt so fond of Aunt Philippa as I did at that moment when she leaned over the carriage with outstretched hands.

'My dear, how well you are looking! Five years younger. —Does she not look well, Sara?'

Sara nodded and smiled, and made room for me to pass her, and then gave orders that my luggage should be intrusted to the maid, who would convey it in a cab to Hyde Park Gate.

'If you do not mind, Ursula, we are going round the Park for a little,' observed Sara, with a pretty blush.

Her mother laughed: 'Colonel Ferguson is riding in the Row, and will be looking out for us. He is coming this evening, as usual, but Sara thinks four-and-twenty hours too long to wait.'

'Oh, mother, how can you talk so?' returned Sara bashfully. 'You know Donald asked us to meet him, and he would be so disappointed. And it is such a lovely afternoon, —if Ursula does not mind.'

'On the contrary, I shall like it very much,' I returned, moved by curiosity to see Colonel Ferguson again. I had never seen him by daylight, and, though we had often met at the evening receptions, we had not exchanged a dozen words.

I thought Sara was looking prettier than ever. A sort of radiance seemed to surround her. Youth and beauty, perfect health, a light heart, and satisfied affections,—these were the gifts of the gods that had been showered upon her. Would those bright, smiling eyes ever shed tears? I wondered. Would any sorrow drive away that light, careless gaiety? I hoped not. It was pleasant to see any one so happy. And then I thought of Lesbia and Gladys, and sighed.

'You do not look at all tired, Ursie,' observed Sara affectionately, laying her little gloved hand on mine. 'She looks quite nice and fresh: does she not, mother?—I was so afraid that you would have come up in your nurse's livery, as Jocelyn calls it,—black serge, and a horrid dowdy bonnet.'

'Oh no; I knew better than that,' I returned, with a complacent glance at my handsome black silk, one of Uncle Brian's presents. I had the comfortable conviction that even Sara could not find fault with my bonnet and mantle. I had made a careful toilet purposely, for I knew what importance they attached to such things. Sara's little speech rewarded me, as well as Aunt Philippa's approving look.

'It has not done her any harm,' I heard her observe, *sotto voce*. 'She certainly looks younger.'

I took advantage of a pause in Sara's chatter to ask after Jill. Aunt Philippa answered me, for Sara was bowing towards a passing carriage.

'Oh, poor child, she wanted to come with us to meet you, but it was Professor Hugel's afternoon. He teaches her German literature, you know. I was anxious for her not to miss his lesson, and she was very good about it. She is coming down to afternoon tea, and of course we shall see her in the evening.'

'Poor dear Jocelyn! she was longing to come, I know. You and Miss Gillespie are terribly severe,' observed Sara, with a light laugh. She was so free and gay herself that she rather pitied her young sister, condemned to the daily grind of lessons and hard work.

'Nonsense, Sara!' returned her mother sharply. 'We are not severe at all. Jocelyn knows that it is all for her good if Miss Gillespie keeps her to her task. My dear Ursula, we are

all charmed with Miss Gillespie,—even Sara, though she pretends to call her strict and old-fashioned. She is a most amiable, ladylike woman, and Jocelyn is perfectly happy with her.

'I am very pleased with Jocelyn,' she went on. 'You have done her good, Ursula, and both her father and I are very grateful to you. She is not nearly so wayward and self-willed. She takes great pains with her lessons, and is most industrious. She is not so awkward, either, and Miss Gillespie thinks it will be a good plan if I take her out with me driving sometimes when Sara is married. I shall only have Jocelyn then,' finished Aunt Philippa, with a regretful look at her daughter. I was much interested in all they had to tell me, but I was not sorry when we entered the Park and the stream of talk died away.

I almost felt as though I were in a dream, as the moving kaleidoscope of horses and carriages and foot-passengers passed before my eyes.

Yesterday at this time I was sitting in poor Robert Lambert's whitewashed attic, listening to the sparrows that were twittering under the eaves. When I had left the cottage I had walked down country roads, meeting nothing but a donkey-cart and two tramps.

Now the sunshine was playing on the rhododendrons and on the green leaves of the trees in Hyde Park. A brass band had struck up in the distance. The riders were cantering up and down the Row, to the admiration of the well-dressed crowds that sauntered under the trees or lingered by the railings. Carriages were passing and repassing. A four-in-hand drove past us, followed by a tandem. Beautiful young faces smiled out of the carriages. A few of them looked weary and careworn. Now and then under the smart bonnet one saw the pinched weazened face of old age,—dowagers in big fur capes looking out with their dim hungry eyes on the follies of Vanity Fair. One wondered at the set senile smile on these old faces; they had fed on husks all their lives, and the food had failed to nourish them; their strength had failed over the battle of life, but they still refused to leave the field of their former triumphs. Everywhere in these fashionable crowds one sees these pale meagre faces that belong to a past age. They wear gorgeous velvets, jewels, feathers, paint: like Jezebel, they would look out of the window curiously to the last. How one longs to take them gently out of the crowd, to wash their poor cheeks, and lead them to some quiet home, where they may shut their tired

eyes in peace! 'What is the world to you?' one would say to them. 'You have done all your tasks,—well or badly; leave the arena to the young and the strong; it is no place for you; come home and rest, before the dark angel finds you in your tinsel and gewgaws.' Would they listen to me, I wonder?

Sara's soft dimples came into play presently. A pretty blush rose to her face. A tall man with a bronzed handsome face and iron-gray moustache had detached himself from the other riders, and was cantering towards the carriage that was now drawn up near the entrance: in another moment he had checked his horse with some difficulty.

'I have been looking out for you the last three-quarters of an hour,' he said, addressing Sara. 'I could not see the carriage anywhere.—Miss Garston, we have met before, but I think we hardly know each other,' looking at me with some degree of interest. Sara's cousin was no longer indifferent to him.

I answered him as civilly as I could, but I could see his attention wandered to his young *fiancée*, and he soon rode round to her side of the carriage. It was evident, as Lesbia said, that the colonel was honestly in love with Sara. She looked very young beside him, but there must have been something very winning in her sweet looks and words to the man who had known trouble and had laid a young wife and child to rest in an Indian grave.

Before the evening was over I felt I liked Colonel Ferguson immensely, and thought far more of Sara for being his choice; there was an air of frankness and *bonhomie* about him that won one's heart; he was sensible and practical. In spite of his fondness for Sara, he would keep her in order: one could see that. I heard him rebuke her very gently that first evening for some extravagance she was planning. They were standing apart from the others on the balcony, but I was near the open window, and I heard him say distinctly, in a grave voice,—

'I am very sorry to disappoint you, but I must ask you to give up this idea, my darling; it would not be right in our position: surely you must see that.'

'No, Donald, I do not see it a bit,' she answered quickly.

'Then will you be satisfied with my seeing it, and give it up for my sake, dear?'

I knew when they came back into the room that he had got his way. Sara was smiling as happily as usual: her disappointment had not gone very deep. Her future husband would have

very little trouble with her. She was neither self-willed nor selfish. She wanted to be happy herself and make other people happy; she would be easily guided.

When we left the Park Colonel Ferguson rode off to his club, and we drove home rather quickly. There were some visitors waiting for Sara in the drawing-room, so I went up to my old room to take off my bonnet. Martha would unpack my boxes, Aunt Philippa told me, as she gave me another kiss in the hall.

I had not been there for five minutes when I heard flying footsteps down the passage, and the next moment Jill's strong arms had taken me by the shoulders and turned me round.

'Now, Jill, I don't mean to be strangled as usual'; but she left me no breath for more.

'Oh, my dear, precious old bear, this is too good to be true! I nearly cried with joy this morning at the idea of seeing you in your old room and knowing you will be here a whole fortnight. I declare, after all, Sara is very nice to get married.'

No, Jill was not changed; she was as real and big and demonstrative as usual, but somehow she looked nicer.

'You must be quick,' she continued, 'for father has come in, and Clayton has taken in the tea. We must go down directly; but I want you to see Miss Gillespie first.' And Jill looked proud and eager as she led me down the passage.

The schoolroom was still the same dull back room that Aunt Philippa thought so conducive to her young daughter's studies, but it certainly looked more cheerful this evening.

The window was opened. There was a window-box full of gay flowers. A great bowl of my favourite wall-flowers was on the table, and another vase, with trails of laburnum and lilac, was on Jill's little table. The fresh air and sunshine and the sweet scent of the flowers had quite transformed the dingy room. There was new cretonne on the old sofa, a handsome cloth on the centre-table, and a new easy-chair.

Miss Gillespie was sitting by the window, reading. She had an interesting face and rather sad gray eyes, but her manner was decidedly prepossessing.

She looked at her pupil with affection. Evidently Jill's abruptness and awkwardness were not misunderstood by her.

'I want you two to like each other,' Jill had said, without a pretence of introduction; and we had both laughed and extended our hands.

'I seem to know you already, Miss Garston,' she said, in a pleasant voice. 'Jocelyn talks about you so much that you cannot be a stranger to me.—Do you know your father has come in, dear?' turning to Jill.

'Yes, and I must take my cousin downstairs. Good-bye for the present, Gypsy.'

Miss Gillespie smiled again when she saw my astonishment at Jill's familiarity.

'Jocelyn thinks my name too long, and has abbreviated it to Gypsy. Mrs. Garston was terribly shocked at first, but I told her that it did not matter in the least: in fact, I like it.'

'She is such a dear old thing!' burst out Jill, as we left the schoolroom and proceeded downstairs arm in arm. 'I never think of her as my governess; she is just a kind friend who helps me with my lessons and walks with me. We do have such cosy times together. Does not the schoolroom look nice, Ursie?'

'Very nice indeed, my dear.'

'So I think; but Sara says it is horrid: she has made mother promise to give me her room directly she is married. Sara has a beautiful piano there, and a bookcase, and all sorts of pretty things. It is a lovely room, you know, and looks out over the Park. Mother thinks it too nice and pretty for a schoolroom; but I am to call it my study and keep it tidy. And Gypsy is to have the old schoolroom for herself: so we are both pleased. It is nice for her to have a room of her own, where she can be alone.'

'Your mother is very kind to you, Jill.'

'Awfully kind—I mean very kind: Gypsy does so dislike that expression. Do you know, I think you two are rather alike in that? Gypsy is very unhappy sometimes, though. I have found her crying more than once when I have left her long alone; only mother does not know, and I don't mean to tell her, because she thinks people ought always to be cheerful. It was so sad that clergyman dying,—the one she was to marry; his name was Maurice Compton. I saw the name in one of her books: "Lilian Gillespie, from her devoted friend, Maurice Compton."'

'My dear Jill, how long are you going to keep me standing in the hall? Clayton will find us here directly.'

'Yes, I know'; but Jill showed no intention of moving; the prospect of cold tea did not trouble her; 'but I want to tell you

something before you go in. Mother is certainly kinder to me than she ever has been; she says I am to drive with her very often, and that she shall take me to see picture-galleries. And father is going to buy a horse for me, because he says I ride so well that I may go out with him, as a rule, instead of with a master; and——'

'You shall tell me all that presently,' I returned, 'for I am too tired to stand on this mat any longer. Are you coming, Jill? or shall I go in without you?' but of course I knew she would follow me.

The room seemed full when we entered. Aunt Philippa was at the tea-table; Sara was flitting about the room from one guest to another. Uncle Brian, who was standing on the hearth-rug, put out his hand to me.

'I am glad to see you back again, Ursula,' looking at me with his cool, penetrating glance. Uncle Brian was never demonstrative. 'I think the work suits you, to judge by your looks. Take that chair by your aunt, child, and she will give you some tea.' And accordingly I placed myself under Aunt Philippa's wing, while Jill and a boy-officer with a budding moustache waited on me.

The rest of the evening passed very pleasantly. I had a long conversation with Miss Gillespie in the inner drawing-room while Sara and Jill played duets: of course our subject was Jill. Miss Gillespie spoke most warmly of her excellent abilities and fine development of character. 'She will be a very striking woman,' she finished, when the last chords were played and a soft clapping of hands succeeded. 'Whether she will be a happy one is more doubtful: she must not be thwarted too much, and she must have room to expand. Jocelyn wants space and sunshine.'

I thought these remarks very sensible; they taught me that Miss Gillespie had grasped the true idea of Jill's character. There was nothing little about Jill: she never did things by halves: she either loved or hated. She was truthful to a fault. There was a massive freedom and simplicity about her that would guide her safely through the world's pitfalls. 'Space and sunshine,' that was all Jill needed to bring her to maturity and fruition. Some girls may be trusted to educate themselves. Jill was one of these.

The next morning Sara took possession of me. A great honour was to be vouchsafed me: I was to be treated to a private view of the trousseau and wedding-presents.

I had exhausted my vocabulary of admiring epithets, and sat

in eloquent silence, long before Sara had finished her display. It was like the picture of Pandora opening her box, to see the pretty creature opening the big, carved wardrobe to show me the layers of delicate embroidered raiment, muslin and laces and jewels, curious trinkets and wonderful gifts worthy of the Arabian Nights. There were two rooms full of treasures that had been laid at her feet, and no doubt, like Pandora, Sara had the rainbow-tinted hope lying amid the bridal gifts.

'This is Donald's present,' she said, smiling, showing me a diamond spray. 'I am to wear it on Thursday: it is the loveliest present of all,—though mother has given me that beautiful pearl necklace.'

'Wait a moment, Sara,' I said, detaining her as she closed the morocco case: 'tell me, do you not feel like a princess in fairy-land, with all this glitter round you? Does it all seem real, somehow?'

'Donald is real, anyhow,' she returned, with a charming blush. 'Nothing would be real without him. Oh, Ursula, it is nice to be so happy! I always have been happier than other girls.' And something like a tear stole to her pretty eyes.

'Now you must see your own dress,' she continued, brushing off the tiny tear-drop, with a laugh at her own sentimentality. 'What do you think of that? Is that not charming taste?'

'It is far too good for me,' I returned seriously. 'How could Uncle Brain buy that for me? It is beautiful; it is perfect, and just my taste.' And then I could say no more, for Sara had placed her hands across my lips to silence me.

'Then you must wear it, dear. Father and mother wanted to give you something nice, because you were so good to Jocelyn, and I knew you had a fancy for a velvet gown. Is not that yellowish lace charming, Ursula? and the bonnet harmonises so well! Your bouquet is to be cream-coloured, too, with just a tea-rose or so. You will look quite pretty in it, Ursula dear. Do you know Donald liked the look of you so yesterday? he said you looked so strong and sensible; he called you an interesting woman.'

I hastened to change the subject, for it recalled certain words that I vainly tried to forget. It was a relief when visitors were announced and Sara left me to go down to the drawing-room. I was glad to be alone for a few minutes. Aunt Philippa came up soon afterwards with a bevy of friends, and I escaped to my own room until luncheon-time.

I grew a little weary of the bustle by and by, and yet I was pleased and interested too; the excitement was infectious; one smiled to see so many happy faces; and then there was so much to do, every one was pressed into the service. Jill shut up her books with a bang; her piano remained closed. She and Miss Gillespie were answering notes, unpacking presents, running to and fro with messages; people came all day long; they talked in corners on the balcony, in Uncle Brian's study; no room was held sacred.

A cargo of flowers arrived presently; the hall and drawing-room were to be transformed into bowers. It must rain roses as well as sunshine on the young princess. Sara's bright face appeared every now and then among the workers; a little court surrounded her; sometimes Colonel Ferguson's bronzed face looked over her shoulders.

'That is very pretty, Ursula. I see you have caught the right idea. Jocelyn dear, you are overfilling that basket, and some of the stalks are showing. Miss Gillespie will put it right for you. Come, Grace, shall we go upstairs?'

Sara nodded and smiled at us as she led the way to the upper regions. Pandora was for ever opening her box in those days: she was never weary of fingering her silks and satins.

'Now she has gone, let us rest a little,' Jill exclaimed, letting her arms fall to her side. 'Are you not tired of it all, Ursie dear? I get so giddy that I keep rubbing my eyes. I never knew weddings meant all this fuss. Why cannot people do things more quietly? If I ever get married I shall just put on my bonnet and walk to the nearest church with father. What is the use of all this nonsense? It is like decking the victim for the sacrifice, to see all these roses and green leaves. Supposing we have a band of music to drown her groans while she is dressing,' finished Jill rebelliously, as she contemplated her flower-basket with dissatisfied eyes.

Jill's speech recalled Mr. Hamilton's words most vividly: 'Because two people elect to join hands for the journey of life, is there any adequate reason why all their idle acquaintances should accompany them with cymbals and prancings, and all sorts of fooleries, just at the most solemn moment of life?' and again, '"Till death us do part,"—can any one, man or woman, say those words lightly and not bring down a doom upon himself?'

Could I ever forget how solemnly he had said this? After all, Mr. Hamilton was right, and I think Jill was right too.

CHAPTER XXXI

WEDDING-CHIMES

WHEN we had finished the flowers and brought in Aunt Philippa to see the effect, I left the others and went up to my room. I had been busy since the early morning, and felt I had fairly earned a little rest.

The room that was still called mine had a side-window looking over the Park. Down below carriages were passing and repassing; a detachment of hussars trotted past; people were pouring out from the Albert Hall,—some afternoon concert was just over; the children were playing as usual on the grass; the soft evening shadows were creeping up between the trees; the sky was blue and cloudless. May was wearing her choicest smiles on the eve of Sara's wedding-day.

Martha, the schoolroom maid, had brought me a cup of tea; the rest of the family were crowded in Uncle Brian's study; the dining-room was already in the hands of Gunter's assistants; the long drawing-room and inner drawing-room were sweet with roses and baskets of costly hot-house flowers; a bank of rhododendrons was under the hall window; the house was full of sunshine, flowers, and the ripple of laughter. I could hear the laughter through the closed door. Sara's musical tinkle rang out whenever the door opened. I had fallen into a sort of waking dream, when something white and golden passed between me and the sunlight; a light kiss was dropped on my drowsy eyelids, and there was Lesbia smiling at me.

She looked so cool and fair in her white gown, with a tiny bouquet of delicious tea-roses in her hand, her golden hair shining under her little lace bonnet. I thought she looked

more than ever like Charlie's white lily, only now there was a touch of colour on her face.

'Oh, Ursie dear, I am so pleased to see you!' she said gently, laying the flowers on my lap. 'Clayton told me that every one else was in Mr. Garston's study, so I begged to run up here. We only came up from Rutherford this morning, and we have been so busy ever since. I was afraid you were asleep, for I knocked at the door without getting any answer; but no, your eyes were wide open; so you were only dreaming.'

'I believe I was very tired, they have kept me running about all day. Take this low chair by the window, dear, and tell me all about yourself. Do you know it is six months since we met? There must be so much to say on both sides. But, first, how is Mrs. Fullerton? and is it Rutherford that has given you those pretty roses, Lesbia?' But the roses I meant were certainly not on my lap.

She answered literally and seriously, in her usual way: 'Yes, they are from Rutherford: I cut them myself, in spite of Patrick's grumbling. Mother is very well, Ursula; I am sure the country agrees with her. We have been there since March, and these two months have been the happiest to me since dear Charlie died.'

'You need not tell me that,' I returned, with a satisfied look at the sweet face. 'Health has returned to you; you are no longer languid and weary; your eyes are bright, your voice has a stronger tone in it.'

'Is it wrong?' she answered quickly. 'I do not forget, I shall never forget, but the pain seems soothed somehow. When I wake up in the bed where I slept as a child, I hear the birds singing, and I do not say to myself, "Here is another long weary day to get through." On the contrary, I jump up and dress myself as quickly as I can, for I love to be out among the dews; everything is so sweet and still in the early morning; there is such freshness in the air.'

'And these early walks are good for you.'

'Oh, I never leave the grounds. I just saunter about with Flo and Rover. When breakfast is ready I have a bouquet to lay beside mother's plate. Dear, good mother! do you know she cannot say enough in praise of Rutherford, now she sees the breakfasts I eat? I think she would be reconciled to any place if she saw me enjoy my food: at the Albert Hall Mansions I never felt hungry; I was always too tired to eat.'

'I knew Mrs. Fullerton would never repent her sacrifice.'

'No, indeed; mother and I have never been so cosy in our lives. She sits in the verandah and laughs over my quarrels with Patrick: he is quite as cross-grained as ever, dear old fellow, but there is nothing that he will not do for me. We are making a rose-garden now. Do you remember that sunny corner by the terrace and sundial?—dear Charlie always wanted me to have a rose-garden there. We have trellis-work arches and a little arbour. Patrick and Hawkins are doing the work, but I fancy they cannot get on without me.'

She stopped with a little laugh at her own conceit, and then went on:

'And I am so busy in other ways, Ursula. Every Monday I go to the mothers' meeting with Mrs. Trevor, and I have some of the old women at the almshouses besides,—I am so fond of those old women,—and I have just begun afternoons for tennis; people like these, and they come from such a distance. Mr. Manners declares the Rutherford Thursdays will soon be known all over the country.'

'Bravo, Lesbia! you are taking your position nobly, my dear; this is just what Charlie wanted to see you,—a brave sweet woman who would not let sorrow and disappointment spoil her own and other people's lives.' Then, as she blushed with pleasure at my words, I said carelessly, 'Do you often see Mr. Manners?'

'Oh yes,' she returned without hesitation,—'on my Thursdays, and at church, and at the vicarage: we are always meeting somewhere. He was Charlie's friend, you know, and he is so nice and sympathising, and tells me so much about their school life and college life together. He was so fond of Charlie, and the undergraduates used to call them Damon and Pythias.'

'To be sure: Charlie was always talking about Harcourt. He has grown very handsome, I have heard.'

'Mother says so: he is certainly good-looking,' she answered simply; 'and then he is so kind. I feel almost ashamed at troubling him so much with our business and commissions, but he never seems to mind any amount of trouble. I have never met any one so unselfish.'

I turned away my head to hide a smile. Lesbia was quite serious. She was too much absorbed in the memory of Charlie to read the secret of Harcourt Manners's unselfishness: the kindly attentions of the young man, his solicitude and sympathy, had not yet awakened a suspicion of the truth.

One day Lesbia's eyes would be opened, and she would be shocked and surprised to find the hold that Charlie's friend had got over her heart. Very likely she would dismiss him and lock herself up in her room and cry for hours; probably she would persist for some weeks in making herself and him exceedingly unhappy. But it would be all no use; the tie of sympathy would be too strong; he would have made himself too necessary to her. One day she would have to yield, and find her life's happiness in thus yielding. Charlie's white lily was too fair to be left to wither alone, and I knew Harcourt Manners would be worthy to win the prize.

I could see it all before it happened, while Lesbia talked in her serious way of Mr. Manners's unselfishness. Presently, however, she changed the subject, and began questioning me eagerly about my work; and just then Jill joined us, and placed herself on the floor at my feet, with the firm intention, evidently, of listening to our remarks.

The conversation drifted round to Gladwyn presently. I could see Lesbia was a little curious about these friends of mine that I had mentioned casually in my letters.

'I can't quite make out the relationship,' she said, in a puzzled tone. 'You are always talking about this Gladys. Is she really so beautiful and fascinating? And who is Miss Darrell?'

'You had better ask me,' interrupted Jill, quite rudely, 'for Ursula is so absurdly infatuated about the whole family; she thinks them all quite perfect, with the exception of the double-faced lady, Miss Darrell; but they are very ordinary,—quite ordinary people, I assure you.'

'Now, Jill, we do not want any of your impertinence. Lesbia would rather hear my description of my friends.'

'On the contrary, she would prefer the opinion of an unprejudiced person,' persisted Jill, with a voluble eloquence that took away my breath. 'Listen to me, Lesbia. This Mr. Hamilton that Ursula is always talking about'—how I longed to box Jill's pretty little ears! she had lovely ears, pink and shell-like, hidden under her black locks—'is an ugly, disagreeable-looking man.'

'Oh!' from Lesbia, in rather a disappointed tone.

'He is quite old,—about five-and-thirty, they say,—and he has a long smooth-shaven face like a Jesuit. I don't recollect seeing a Jesuit, though; but he is very like one all the same.

He has dark eyes that stare somehow and seem to put you down, and he has a way of laughing at you civilly that makes you wild; and Ursula believes in him, and is quite meek in his presence, just because he is a doctor and orders her about.'

'My dear Lesbia, I hope you are taking Jill's measure with a grain of salt. Mr. Hamilton is not disagreeable, and he never orders me about.'

Jill shook her head at me, and went on:

'Then there is the double-faced lady—but never mind her; we both hate her.'

'You mean Miss Darrell, Mr. Hamilton's cousin?'

'Yes, Witch Etta, as Lady Betty calls her. She is a dark-eyed, slim piece of elegance, utterly dependent on her clothes for beauty; she dresses perfectly, and makes herself out a good-looking woman, but she is not really good-looking; and she is always talking, and her talk is exciting, because there is always something behind her words, something mildly suggestive of volcanoes, or something equally pleasant and enlivening. If she smiles, for instance, one seems to think one must find out the meaning of that.'

'Who has taught you all this, Jill?' asked Lesbia, bewildered by this sarcasm.

'My mother-wit,' returned Jill, utterly unabashed. 'Well, then there is Gladys. Ah, now we are coming to the saddest part. Once upon a time there was a beautiful maiden, really a lovely creature,—oh, I grant you that, Ursula,—but she fell under the power of some wicked magician, male or female,—some folks say Witch Etta,—who changed her into a snow-maiden or an ice-maiden. If she were only alive, this Gladys would be most lovely and bewitching; but, you see, she is only a poor snow-maiden, very white and cold. If she gives you her hand, it quite freezes you; her kiss turns you to ice too; her smile is congealing. Ursula tries to thaw her sometimes, but it does no good. She is only Gladys, the snow-maiden.'

I was too angry with Jill to say a word. Lesbia looked more mystified than ever.

'If she be so cold and sad, how can Ursula be so fond of her?' she demanded, in her practical way. But Jill took no notice, but rattled on:

'Little brown Betsy—I beg her pardon—Lady Betty, is the best of all: she is really human. Gladys is only half alive. Lady Betty laughs and talks and pouts; she wrinkles up like

an old woman when she is cross, and has lovely dimples when she smiles. She is not pretty, but she is quaint, and interesting, and childlike. I am very fond of Lady Betty,' finished Jill, with a benevolent nod.

I proceeded to annotate Jill's mischievous remarks with much severity. I left Mr. Hamilton alone, with the exception of a brief sentence; I assured Lesbia that he was not ugly, but only peculiar-looking, and that he was an intellectual, earnest-minded man who had known much trouble. Jill made a wry face, but did not dare to contradict me.

'As for his sister Gladys,' I went on, 'she is simply a most beautiful girl, whose health has failed a little from a great shock'; here Jill and Lesbia both looked curious, but I showed no intention of enlightening them. 'She is a little too sad and quiet for Jill's taste,' I continued, 'and she is also somewhat reserved in manner, but when she likes a person thoroughly she is charming.'

I went on a little longer in this strain, until I had thoroughly vindicated my favourite from Jill's aspersion.

'You are very fond of her, Ursula: your eyes soften as you talk of her. I should like to see this wonderful Gladys.'

'You must see her one day,' I rejoined; and then the gong sounded, and Lesbia jumped up in a fright, because she said she would keep her mother waiting, and Jill hurried off to her room to dress.

We had what Jill called a picnic dinner in Uncle Brian's study. Every one enjoyed it but Clayton, who seemed rather put out by the disorganised state of the house, and who was always getting helplessly wedged in between the escritoire and the table. We would have much rather waited on ourselves, and we wished Mrs. Martin had forgone the usual number of courses. When it was over we all went into the long drawing-room, and Jill played soft snatches of Chopin, while Sara and Colonel Ferguson whispered together on the dark balcony.

Mrs. Fullerton and Lesbia joined us later on, and then Colonel Ferguson took his leave. I thought Sara looked a little quiet and subdued when she joined us; her gay chatter had died away, her eyes were a little plaintive. When we had said good-night, and Jill and I were passing down the corridor hand in hand, we could hear voices from Aunt Philippa's room. Through the half-opened door I caught a glimpse of Sara: she was kneeling by her mother's chair, with her head on Aunt

Philippa's shoulder. Was she bidding a tearful regret to her old happy life? I wondered; was she looking forward with natural shrinking and a little fear to the new responsibility that awaited her on the morrow? It was the mother who was talking; one could imagine how her heart would yearn over her child to-night,—what fond prayers would be uttered for the girl. Aunt Philippa was a loving mother: worldliness had not touched the ingrained warmth of her nature.

I am glad to remember how brightly the sun shone on Sara's wedding-day. There was not a cloud in the sky. When I woke, the birds were singing in Hyde Park, and Jill in her white wrapper was looking at me with bright, excited eyes.

'It is such a lovely morning!' she exclaimed rapturously. 'Actually Sara is asleep! Fancy sleeping under such circumstances! She and mother are going to have breakfast together in the schoolroom. Do be quick and dress, Ursula; father is always so early, you know.'

Uncle Brian was reading his paper as usual when I entered the study. Miss Gillespie was pouring out coffee. Jill was fidgeting about the room, until her father called her to order, and then she sat down to the table. I do not think any of us enjoyed our breakfast. Uncle Brian certainly looked dull; Jill was too excited to eat; poor Miss Gillespie had tears in her eyes; she poured out tea and coffee with cold shaking hands. 'Lilian Gillespie, from her devoted friend Maurice Compton,' came into my head: no wonder the thought of marriage-bells and bridal finery made her sad. I am afraid I should have shut myself up in my own room, and refused to mingle with the crowd, under these circumstances. I quite understood the feeling of sympathy that made Jill stoop down and kiss the smooth brown hair as she passed the governess's chair: it was a sort of affectionate homage to misfortune patiently borne.

I went up to the schoolroom when breakfast was over. Aunt Philippa looked as though she had not slept: there was a jaded look about her eyes. Sara, on the contrary, looked fresh and smiling; she was just going to put herself in her maid's hands; but she tripped back in her pretty muslin dressing-gown and rose-coloured ribbons to kiss me and ask me to look after Jill's toilet.

'Every one is so busy, and mother and Draper will be attending to me. Do, please, Ursie dear, see that she puts on her bonnet straight.' And of course I promised to do my best.

As it happened, Jill was very tractable and obedient. I think

her beautiful bridesmaid's dress rather impressed her. I saw a look of awe in her eyes as she regarded herself, and then she dropped a mocking courtesy to her own image.

'I am Jocelyn to-day, remember that, Ursula. I don't look a bit like Jill. Jocelyn Adelaide Garston, bridesmaid.'

'You look charming, Jill—I mean Jocelyn.'

'Oh, how horrid it sounds from your lips, Ursie! I like my own funny little name best from you. Now come and let me finish you.' And Jill, in spite of her fine dress, would persist in waiting on me. She was very voluble in her expression of admiration when I had finished, but I did not seem to recognise 'Nurse Ursula' in the elegantly-dressed woman that I saw reflected in the pier-glass. 'Fine feathers make fine birds,' I said to myself.

I think we all agreed that Sara looked lovely. Lesbia, who joined us in the drawing-room, contemplated her with tears in her eyes.

'You look like a picture, Sara,' she whispered,—'like a fairy queen,—in all that whiteness.' Sara dimpled and blushed. Of course she knew how pretty she was, and how people liked to look at her; but I am sure she was thinking of Donald, as her eyes rested on her bridal bouquet. Dearly as she loved all this finery and consequence, there was a soft, thoughtful expression in her eyes that was quite new to them, and that I loved to see.

We went to church presently, and Lesbia and I, standing side by side, heard the beautiful, awful service. 'Till death us do part.' Oh, what words to say to any man! Surely false lips would grow paralysed over them!

A most curious thing happened just then. I had raised my eyes, when they suddenly encountered Mr. Hamilton's. A sort of shock crossed me. Why was he here? How had he come? How strange! how very strange! The next moment he had disappeared from my view: probably he had withdrawn behind a pillar that he might not attract my notice. I could almost have believed that it was an illusion and fancied resemblance, only I had never seen a face like Mr. Hamilton's.

The momentary glimpse had distracted me, and I heard the remainder of the service rather absently; then the pealing notes of the wedding-march resounded through the church; we all stood waiting until Sara had signed her name, and had come out of the vestry leaning on her husband's arm.

I was under Major Egerton's care. The crowd round the door was so great that it was with the greatest difficulty that he could pilot me to the carriage. Lesbia was following us with another officer, whose name I did not know. As we took our seats I distinctly saw Mr. Hamilton cross the road. He was walking quietly down Hyde Park. As we passed he turned and took off his hat. I thought it was a strange thing that he should be in the neighbourhood on Sara's wedding-day, and that he should have deigned to play the part of a spectator after his severe strictures on gay weddings. I supposed his business in Edinburgh was finished, and he had an idle day or two on his hands. I half expected him to call the next day, for I had given him my address; but he did not come, and I heard from Mr. Tudor afterwards that he had gone on to Folkestone.

CHAPTER XXXII

A FIERY ORDEAL

It is a hackneyed truism, and, like other axioms, profoundly true, that wedding-festivities are invariably followed by a sense of blank dulness.

It is like the early morning after a ball, when the last guests have left the house: the lights flicker in the dawn, the empty rooms want sweeping and furnishing to be fit for habitation. Yawns, weariness, satiety, drive the jaded entertainers to their resting-places. Every one knows how tawdry the ball-dress looks in the clear morning light. The diamonds cease to flash, the flowers are withered, the game is played out.

Something of this languor and vacuum is felt when the bride and bridegroom have driven away amid the typical shower of rice. The smiles seem quenched, somehow; mother and sisters shed tears; a sense of loss pervades the house; the bridal finery is heaped up in the empty room; one little glove is on the table, another has fallen to the floor. All sorts of girlish trinkets that have been forgotten lie unheeded in corners.

I know we all thought that evening would never end, and I quite understood why Jill hovered near her mother's chair, listening to her conversation with Mrs. Fullerton. Every now and then Aunt Philippa broke down and shed a few quiet tears. I heard her mention Ralph's name once. 'Poor boy! how proud he would have been of his sister!' Uncle Brian heard it too, for I saw him wince at the sound of his son's name; but Jill stroked her mother's hand, and said, quite naturally, 'Most likely Ralph knows all about it, mamma, and of course he is glad that Sara is so happy.'

Our pretty light-hearted Sara. I had no idea that I should miss her so much! Indeed, we all missed her: it seemed to me now that I had undervalued her. True, she had not been a congenial companion to me in my dark days; but even then I had wronged her. Why should I have expected her to grope among the shadows with me, instead of following her into the sunshine? Sara could not act contrary to her nature. Sad things depressed her. She wanted to cause every one to be happy.

Her feelings were far deeper than I had imagined them to be. I liked the way she spoke to Jill when she was bidding good-bye to us all.

'Jocelyn dear, promise me that you will be good to mother. She has no one but you now to study her little ways and make her comfortable, and she is not as young as she was, and things tire her.' Of course Jill promised with tears in her eyes, and Sara went away smiling and radiant. Jill was already trying to redeem her promise, as she hovered like a tall slim shadow behind her mother's chair in the twilight.

'Come and sit down, Jocelyn, my dear,' observed Aunt Philippa at last, in her motherly voice. When I looked again, Jill's black locks were bobbing on her mother's lap, and the three seemed all talking together.

There was very little rest for any one during the next few days. Sara's marriage had brought sundry relations from their country homes up to town, and there was open house kept for all. Jill went sight-seeing with the young people. Aunt Philippa drove some of the elder ladies to the Academy, to the Grosvenor Gallery, to the Park, and other places.

Every day there were luncheon-parties, tea-parties, dinner-parties; the long drawing-room seemed full every evening. Jill put on one or other of her pretty new gowns, and played her pieces industriously; there was no stealing away in corners now. There were round games for the young people; now and then they went to the theatre or opera: no wonder Jill was too tired and excited to open her lesson-books. My fortnight's visit extended itself to three weeks. Aunt Philippa could not spare me; she said I was much too useful to her and Uncle Brian. I wrote to Mrs. Barton and also to Lady Betty, and I begged the latter to inform her brother that I could not leave my relations just yet.

Lady Betty wrote back at once. She had given my message,

she said, but Giles had not seemed half pleased with it. She thought he was going away somewhere, she did not know where; but he had told her to say that there were no fresh cases, and that Robert Lambert was going on all right, and that as I seemed enjoying myself so much it was a pity not to take a longer holiday while I was about it, and he sent his kind regards; and that was all. I suppose I ought to have been satisfied, but it struck me that there was a flavour of sarcasm about Mr. Hamilton's message.

But he was right; I was enjoying myself. Lesbia was still in town, and I saw her every day. My acquaintance with Miss Gillespie grew to intimacy, and I think we mutually enjoyed each other's society. Aunt Philippa seemed to turn to me naturally for help and comfort, and her constant 'Ursula, my dear, will you do this for me?' gave me a real feeling of pleasure; and then there was Jill to pet and praise at every odd moment.

One day we were all called upon to admire Sara's new signature, 'Sara Ferguson,' written in bold, girlish characters. 'Donald is looking over my shoulder as I write it, dear mamma,' Sara wrote, in a long postscript. 'Are husbands always so impertinent? Donald pretends that it is part of his duty to see that I dot my *i*'s and cross my *t*'s: he will talk such nonsense. There, he has gone off laughing, and I may end comfortably by telling you that he spoils me dreadfully and is so good to me, and that I am happier than I deserve to be, and your very loving child, Sara.'

'Poor darling! she always did make her own sunshine,' murmured Aunt Philippa fondly.

Now, that afternoon who should call upon us but Mr. Tudor? Jill was out, as usual, riding with two of her cousins and Uncle Brian; they had gone off to Kew or Richmond for the afternoon; but Aunt Philippa, who had been dozing in her easy-chair by the window, welcomed the young man very kindly, and made him promise to stay to dinner.

Mr. Tudor tried not to look too much pleased as he accepted the invitation. A sort of blush crossed his honest face as he turned to me: he had two or three messages to deliver, he said. Mr. Cunliffe had given him one, and Mrs. Barton, and Lady Betty. She, Lady Betty, wanted me to know that Miss Darrell was going to Brighton for a week or ten days, and that she hoped I should come home before then.

I heard, too, that Mr. Hamilton had gone to Folkestone, and that he had tried to induce Uncle Max to go with him. 'But it is no use telling him he wants a change,' finished Mr. Tudor, with a sigh; 'he is bent on wearing himself out for other people.'

Mr. Tudor and I chatted on for the remainder of the afternoon. I had taken him out on the balcony: there were an awning and some chairs, and we could sit there in comparative privacy looking down on the passers-by. Aunt Philippa was nodding again: we could hear her regular breathing behind us: poor woman! she was worn out with bustle and gaiety. I was thankful that a grand horticultural *fête* kept all the aunts and cousins away, with the exception of the two who were riding with Jill.

Clayton brought us out some tea presently, and we found plenty of topics for conversation.

All at once I stopped in the middle of a conversation.

'Mr. Tudor, have my eyes deceived me, or was that Leah?'

'Who?—what Leah? I do not know whom you mean!' he returned, rather stupidly, staring in another direction. There was a cavalcade coming up the road,—a tall slim girl, on a chestnut mare, riding on in front with a young man, another girl and an elderly man with a gray moustache following them, a groom bringing up the rear.

Of course it was Jill, smiling and waving towards the balcony; she could not see Mr. Tudor under the awning, but she had caught sight of my silk dress. Jill looked very well on horseback: people always turned round to watch her. She had a good seat, and rode gracefully; the dark habit suited her; she braided her unmanageable locks into an invisible net that kept them tidy.

'Is that Miss Jocelyn?' asked Lawrence, almost in a voice of awe. The young curate grew very red as Jill rode under the balcony and nodded to him in a friendly manner.

'There is Mr. Tudor,' we heard her say. 'Be quick and lift me off my horse, Clarence.' But she had slipped to the ground before her cousin could touch her, and had run indoors.

Mr. Tudor went into the room at once, but I sat still for a moment. Why had I asked him? Of course it was Leah. I could see her strange light-coloured eyes glancing up in my direction. What was she doing in London? I wondered. She was dressed well, evidently in her mistress's cast-off clothes, for

she wore a handsome silk dress and mantle. Had they quarrelled and parted? I felt instinctively that it would be a good day for Gladwyn if Leah ever shook off its dust from her feet. Gladys regarded her as a spy and informer, and she had evidently an unwholesome influence over her mistress.

We separated soon after this to dress for dinner, and Mr. Tudor went to his hotel. I was rather sorry when I came downstairs to find that Jill had made rather a careless toilet. She wore the flimsy Indian muslin gown that I thought so unbecoming to her style, with a string of gold beads of curious Florentine work round her neck. She looked so different from the graceful young Amazon who had ridden up an hour ago that I felt provoked, and was not surprised to hear the old sharp tone in Aunt Philippa's voice:

'My dear Jocelyn, why have you put on that old gown? Surely your new cream-coloured dress with coffee lace would have been more suitable. What was Draper thinking about?'

'I was in too great a hurry; I did not wait for Draper,' returned Jill candidly. 'Draper was dreadfully cross about it, but I ran away from her. What does it matter, mamma? they have all seen my cream-coloured dress, except——' But here Jill laughed: the naughty child meant Mr. Tudor.

'I am afraid there is not time to change it now; but I am very much vexed about it,' returned Aunt Philippa, in a loud whisper. 'You are really looking your worst to-night.' But Jill only laughed again, and asked her cousin Clarence when he took her down to dinner if it were not a very pretty gown.

'I don't know much about gowns,' drawled the young man,—Mr. Tudor and I were following them: 'it looks rather flimsy and washed out. If I were you I would wear something more substantial. You see, you are so big, Jocelyn; your habit suits you better.'

We heard Jill laughing in a shrill fashion at this dubious compliment, and presently she and Mr. Tudor, who sat next to her, were talking as happily as possible. I do not believe he noticed her unbecoming gown: his face had lighted up, and he was full of animation. Poor Lawrence! he was five-and-twenty, and yet the presence of this girl of sixteen was more to him than all the young-ladyhood of Heathfield. Even charming little Lady Betty was beaten out of the field by Jill's dark eyes and sprightly tongue.

It was a very pleasant evening, and we were all enjoying

ourselves: no one imagined anything could or would happen; life is just like that: we should just take up our candlesticks, we thought, and march off to bed when Aunt Philippa gave the signal. No one could have imagined that there would be a moment's deadly peril for one of the party,—an additional thanksgiving for a life preserved that night.

And then no one seemed to know how it happened; people never do see, somehow.

There was music going on. Agatha Chudleigh—the Chudleighs were Aunt Philippa's belongings—was playing the piano, and her brother Clarence was accompanying her on the violoncello. There was a little group round the piano. Jill was beating time, standing with her back to a small inlaid table with a lamp on it. Mr. Tudor was beside her. Jill made a backward movement in her forgetfulness and enthusiasm. The next moment the music stopped with a crash. There was a cry of horror, the lamp seemed falling, glass smashed, liquid fire was pouring down Jill's unfortunate dress. If Mr. Tudor had not caught it, they said afterwards, with all that lace drapery, the room must have been in flames; but he had jerked it back in its place, and, snatching up a bear-skin rug that lay under the piano, had wrapped it round Jill. He was so strong and prompt, there was not a moment lost.

We had all crowded round in a moment, but no one dared to interfere with Mr. Tudor. We could hear Aunt Philippa sobbing with terror. Clarence Chudleigh extinguished the lamp, some one else flung an Indian blanket and a striped rug at Jill's feet. For one instant I could see the girl's face, white and rigid as a statue, as the young man's powerful arms enveloped her. Then the danger was over, and Jill was standing among us unhurt, with her muslin gown hanging in blackened shreds, and with bruises on her round white arms from the rough grip that had saved her life.

One instant's delay, and the fiery fluid must have covered her from head to foot; if Lawrence had not caught the falling lamp, if he had lost one moment in smothering the lighted gown, she must have perished in agony before our eyes; but he was strong as a young Hercules, and, half suffocated and bruised as she was, Jill knew from what he had saved her.

As the scorched bear-skin dropped to the floor, Lawrence picked up the Indian blanket and flung it over Jill's tattered gown. 'Go up to your room, Miss Jocelyn,' he whispered:

'you are all right now.' And she obeyed without a word. Miss Gillespie and I followed. I think Aunt Philippa was faint or had palpitations, for I heard Uncle Brian calling loudly to some one to open the windows. Jill was hysterical as soon as she reached her room. She was quite unnerved, and clung to me, shaking with sobs, while Miss Gillespie mixed some sal-volatile. I could not help crying a little with her from joy and thankfulness; but we got her quiet after a time, and took off the poor gown, and Jill showed us her bruises, and cheered up when we told her how brave and quiet she had been; and then she sat for some minutes with her face hidden in my lap, while I stroked her hair silently and thanked God in my heart for sparing our Jill.

Miss Gillespie had gone downstairs to carry a good report to Aunt Philippa. Directly she had gone, Jill jumped up, still shaking a little, and went to her wardrobe.

'I must go downstairs,' she said, a little feverishly. 'I have never thanked Mr. Tudor for saving my life. Help me to be quick, Ursie dear, for I feel so queer and tottery.' And nothing I could say would prevail on her to remain quietly in her room. While I was arguing with her, she had dragged out her ruby velveteen and was trying to fasten it with her trembling fingers.

'Oh, you are obstinate, Jill: you ought to be good on this night of all nights.' But she made no answer to this, and, seeing her bent on her own way, I brought her a brooch, and would have smoothed her hair, but she pushed me away.

'It does not matter how I look. I am only going down for a few minutes. He is going away, and I want to say good-night to him, and thank him.' And Jill walked downstairs rather unsteadily.

Mr. Tudor was just crossing the hall. When he saw Jill, he hurried up to her at once.

'Miss Jocelyn, this is very imprudent. You ought to have gone to bed: you are not fit to be up after such a shock,' looking at her pale face and swollen eyes with evident emotion.

Jill looked at him gently and seriously, and held out her hands to him quite simply.

'I could not go to bed without thanking you. I am not quite so selfish and thoughtless. You have saved my life: do you think I shall ever forget that?'

Poor Lawrence! the excitement, the terror, and the relief were too much for him; and there was Jill holding his hands

and looking up in his face, with her great eyes full of tears. It was not very wonderful that for a moment he forgot himself.

'I could not help doing it,' he returned. 'What would have become of me if you had died? I could not have borne it.'

Jill drew her hands away, and her face looked a little paler in the moonlight. The young man's excited voice, his strange words, must have told her the truth. No, she was not too young to understand; her head drooped, and she turned away as she answered him,—

'I shall always be grateful. Good-night, Mr. Tudor: I must go to my mother. Come, Ursula.'

She did not look back as we walked across the hall, though poor Lawrence stood quite still watching us. Why had the foolish boy said that? Why had he forgotten his position and her youth? Why had he hinted that her life was necessary to his happiness? Would Jill ever forget those words, or the look that accompanied them? I felt almost angry with Lawrence as I followed Jill into the room.

Jill need never have doubted her mother's love. Aunt Philippa had been too faint and ill to follow her daughter to her room, but her face was quite beautiful with maternal tenderness as she folded the girl in her arms. Not even her father, who especially petted Jill, showed more affection for her that night.

'Oh, Jocelyn, my darling, are you quite sure that you are unhurt? Miss Gillespie says you were only frightened and a little bruised; but I wanted to see for myself. Mr. Tudor will not let us thank him, but we shall be grateful to him all our lives, my pet. What would your poor father and I have done without you?'

Jill hid her face like a baby on her mother's bosom: she was crying quietly. Her interview with Mr. Tudor had certainly upset her. Uncle Brian put his hand in her rough locks. 'Never mind, my little girl: it is now over; you must go to bed and forget it,'—which was certainly very good advice. I coaxed Aunt Philippa to let her go, and promised to remain with her until she was asleep. She was very quiet, and hardly said a word as I helped her to undress, but as I sat down by the bedside she drew my head down beside hers on the pillow.

'Don't think I am not grateful because I do not talk about it, Ursie dear,' she whispered. 'I hope to be better all my life for what has happened to-night.' But as Jill lay, with wide, solemn eyes, in the moonlight, I wondered what thoughts were

coursing through her mind. Was she looking upon her life preserved as a life dedicated, regarding herself as set apart for higher work and nobler uses? or was her gratitude to her young preserver mixed with deeper and more mysterious feelings? I could not tell, but from that night I noticed a regular change in Jill: she became less girlish and fanciful, a new sort of womanliness developed itself, her high spirits were tempered with softness. Uncle Brian was right when he said a few days afterwards 'that his little girl was growing a woman.'

CHAPTER XXXIII

JACK POYNTER

My conscience felt decidedly uneasy that night: in spite of all argument to the contrary, I could not shake off the conviction that it was my duty to speak to Aunt Philippa. I ought to warn her of the growing intimacy between the young people. She and Uncle Brian ought to know that Mr. Tudor was not quite so harmless as he looked.

It made me very unhappy to act the traitor to this honest, simple young fellow. I would rather have taken his hand and bidden him God-speed with his wooing. If I had been Uncle Brian I would have welcomed him heartily as a suitor for Jill. True, she was absurdly young,—only sixteen,—but I would have said to him, 'If you are in earnest, if you really love this girl, and are willing to wait for her, go about your business for three years, and then come and try your chance with her. If she likes you she shall have you. I am quite aware you are poor,—that you are a curate on a hundred and fifty a year; but you are well connected and a gentleman, and as guileless as a young Nathaniel. I could not desire a better husband for my daughter.'

But it was not likely that Uncle Brian would be so quixotic. And I knew that Aunt Philippa was rather ambitious for her children, and it had been a great disappointment to her that Sara had refused a young baronet. So it was with the guilty feelings of a culprit that I entered the morning-room the next morning and asked Aunt Philippa if I might have a few minutes' conversation with her.

To my relief, she treated the whole matter very coolly, and

with a mixture of shrewdness and common sense that quite surprised me.

She assured me that it was not of the least consequence. Young creatures like Jocelyn must pass through this sort of experiences. She was certainly rather young for such an experiment, but it would do her no harm. On the contrary, a little stimulus of gratified vanity might be extremely beneficial in its after-effects. She was somewhat backward and childish for her age. She would have more self-respect at finding herself the object of masculine admiration.

'Depend upon it, it will do her a great deal of good,' went on Aunt Philippa placidly. 'She will try now in earnest to break herself off her little *gaucheries*. As for Mr. Tudor, do not distress yourself about him. He is young enough to have half-a-dozen butterfly fancies before he settles down seriously.'

'I remember,' she continued, 'that during Sara's first season we had rather a trouble about a young barrister. He was a handsome fellow, but terribly poor, and your uncle told me privately that he must not be encouraged. Well, Sara got it into her head that she was in love with him, and, in spite of all I could say to her by way of warning, she would promise him dances, and, in fact, they did a good bit of flirting together. So I told your uncle that we had better leave town earlier that year. We went into Yorkshire, paying visits, and then to Scotland. Sara had never been there before, and we took care that she should have a thoroughly enjoyable trip. My dear, before three months were over she had forgotten Henry Brabazon's existence. It was just a girlish sentimentality; nothing more. When we got back to town we made Mr. Brabazon understand that his attentions were displeasing to your uncle, and before the next season he was engaged to a rich young widow. I do not believe Sara ever missed him.'

I listened to all this in silence. I was much relieved to find that Aunt Philippa was not disposed to blame me for Lawrence Tudor's infatuation. She told me that she was not the least afraid of his influence, and should not discourage his visits. Jocelyn would never see him alone, and it was not likely that she would be staying at Heathfield again. I thought it useless to say any more. I had satisfied my conscience, and might now safely wash my hands of all responsibility. If the thought crossed my mind that Jill was very different from Sara,—that her will was stronger and her affections more tenacious,—there was no

need to give it utterance. Sixteen was hardly the age for a serious love-affair, and I might well be content to leave Jill in her mother's care.

Now and then a doubt of Aunt Philippa's wisdom came to me,—on the last evening, for instance, when I was speaking to Jill about Heathfield, and when I rather incautiously mentioned Lawrence Tudor's name.

I recollected then that Jill had never once spoken of him since the night of the accident. It had dropped completely out of our conversation. I forget what I said then, but it was something about my seeing him at Heathfield.

We were standing together on the balcony, and as I spoke Jill stooped suddenly to look at a little flower-girl who was offering her wares on the pavement below. For a moment she did not answer. But I could see her cheek and even her little ear was flushed.

'Oh yes, you will see him,' she returned presently. 'What a little mite of a child! Look, Ursula. Please remember us to him, and—and we hope he is quite well.' And Jill walked away from me rather abruptly, saying she must ask her mother for some pence. It was then that a doubt of Aunt Philippa's policy crossed my mind; Jill was so different from other girls; and Lawrence Tudor had saved her life.

I had other things to occupy my mind just then,—a fresh anxiety that I could share with no one, and which effectually spoiled the last few days of my London visit.

The sight of Leah had somewhat disturbed me. It had brought back memories of the perplexities and mysteries of Gladwyn. Strange to say, I saw her again the very next day.

Mr. Tudor was calling at the door to inquire after Jill: he had his bag in his hand, and was on his way to the station. I was just going out to call on Lesbia, and we walked a few yards together. Just as I was bidding him good-bye, two women passed us: as I looked at them casually, I saw Leah's flickering light-coloured eyes; she was looking in my direction, but, though I nodded to her, she did not appear to recognise me. The other woman was a stranger.

I was sitting alone on the balcony that afternoon. Aunt Philippa and Jill and Miss Gillespie were driving. I took advantage of their absence and the unusual quiet of the house to finish a book in which I was much interested.

I was very fond of this balcony seat: the awning protected

me from the hot June sun, and the flower-boxes at my feet were sweet with mignonette. I could see without being seen, and the cool glimpses of the green Park were pleasant on this hot afternoon.

The adjoining house was unoccupied: it was therefore with feelings of discomfort that I heard the sound of workmen moving about the premises, and by and by the smell of fresh paint made me put down my book with suppressed annoyance.

A house-painter was standing very near me, painting the outside sashes of the window: he had his back turned to me, and was whistling to himself in the careless way peculiar to his class. It was a clear, sweet whistling, and I listened to it with pleasure.

A sudden noise in the street caused him to look round, and then he saw me, and stopped whistling.

Where had I seen that face? It seemed familiar to me. Of whom did that young house-painter remind me? Could I have seen him at St. Thomas's Hospital? Was it some patient whose name I had forgotten during my year's nursing? I had had more than one house-painter on my list.

I was tormented by the idea that I ought to recognise the face before me, and yet recognition eluded me. I felt baffled and perplexed by some subtile fancied resemblance. As for the young painter himself, he looked at me quietly for a moment, as though I were a stranger, touched his cap, and went on painting. When he had finished his job, he went inside, and I heard him whistling again as he moved about the empty room.

It was a beautiful face: the features were very clearly cut and defined, like—— Good heavens! I had it now: it reminded me of Gladys Hamilton's. The next moment I was holding the balcony railing as though I were giddy; it was like Gladys, but it was still more like the closed picture in Gladys's room. I pressed my hands on my eyelids as with a strong effort I recalled her brother Eric's face, and the next moment the young painter had come to the window again, and I was looking at him between my fingers.

The resemblance could not be my fancy; those were Eric's eyes looking at me. It was the same face, only older and less boyish-looking. The fair moustache was fully grown; the face was altogether more manly and full of character. It must be he; I must go and speak to him; but as I rose, my limbs

trembling with excitement, he moved away, and his whistle seemed to die in the distance.

It was nearly six o'clock, and there was no time to be lost. I ran upstairs and put on my bonnet and mantle. I thought that Clayton looked at me in some surprise,—I was leaving the house without gloves; but I did not wait for any explanation: the men would be leaving off work. The door was open, and I quickly found my way to the drawing-room, but, to my chagrin, it was empty, and an elderly man with gray hair came out of a back room with a basket of carpenter's tools and looked at me inquiringly.

'There is a workman here that I want to find,' I said breathlessly,—'the one that was painting the window-frames just now,—a tall, fair young man.'

'Oh, you'll be meaning Jack Poynter,' he returned civilly; 'he and his mate have just gone.'

'It cannot be the one I mean,' I answered, somewhat perplexed at this. 'He was very young, not more than three- or four-and-twenty, good-looking, with a fair moustache, and he was whistling while he worked.'

'Ay, that's Jack Poynter,' returned the man, taking off his paper cap and rubbing up his bristly gray hair. 'We call Jack "The Blackbird" among us; he is a famous whistler, is Jack.'

'Oh, but that is not his name,' I persisted, in a distressed voice. 'Why do you call him Jack Poynter?'

'That is what he calls himself,' returned the man drily. Evidently he thought my remarks a little odd. 'Folks mostly calls themselves by their own names; among his mates he is known as "The Whistler," or "The Blackbird," or "Gentleman Jack."'

'Well, never mind about his name,' I replied impatiently. 'I want to speak to him. Where does he live? Will you kindly give me his address?'

'You would be welcome to it if I knew it, but "Gentleman Jack" keeps himself dark. None of us know where he lives. I believe it used to be down Holloway; but he has moved lately.'

'I wish you would tell me what you know about him,' I pleaded. 'It is not idle curiosity, believe me, but I think I shall be able to do him a service.'

'I suppose you know something of his belongings,' returned

the man with a shrewd glance. 'Now that is what me and my mates say. We would none of us be surprised if "Gentleman Jack" has respectable folk belonging to him. He has not quite our ways. He is a cut above us, and clips his words like the gentlefolk do. But he is an industrious young fellow, and does not give himself airs.'

'Could you not find out for me where he lives?'

'Well, for the matter of that, you might ask him yourself, miss; he will be here again to-morrow morning, and I am off to Watford on a job. Jack is not at work regularly in these parts. He is doing a turn for a mate of his who is down with a touch of colic. He is working at Bayswater mostly, and he will be here to-morrow morning.'

'You are sure of that?'

'Oh yes. Tom Handley won't be fit for work for a spell yet. He will be here sharp enough, and then you can question him yourself.' And, bidding me a civil good-evening, the man took up his tools and went heavily downstairs, evidently expecting me to follow him. I went back and stole up quietly to my room. Aunt Philippa and Jill had returned from their drive. I could hear their voices as I passed the drawing-room; but I wanted to be alone to think over this strange occurrence.

My pulses were beating high with excitement. Not for one moment did I doubt that I had really seen Eric in the flesh. Gladys's intuition was right: her brother was not dead. I felt that this assurance alone would make her happy.

If she were only at Heathfield, or even at Bournemouth, I would telegraph for her to come; I could word the message so that she would have hastened to me at once; but Paris was too far; too much time would be lost.

Uncle Max, too, had been called to Norwich to attend a cousin's death-bed: I had had a note from him that very morning, so I could not have the benefit of his advice and assistance. I knew that I dared not summon Mr. Hamilton: the brothers had parted in ill blood, with bitter words and looks. Eric looked on his step-brother as his worst enemy. All these years he had been hiding himself from him. I dared not run the risk of bringing them together. I could not make a *confidante* of Aunt Philippa or Uncle Brian. They had old-fashioned views, and would have at once stigmatised Eric as a worthless fellow. Circumstantial evidence was so strong against him that few would have believed in his innocence. Even

Uncle Max condemned him, and in my own heart there lurked a secret doubt whether Gladys had not deceived herself.

No, my only course would be to speak to him myself, to implore him for Gladys's sake to listen to me. My best plan would be to rise as early as possible the next morning, and to be on the balcony by six o'clock. I should see the men come in to their work, and should have no difficulty in making my way to them. The household was not an early one, especially in the season. I should have the house to myself for an hour or so.

Of course my future movements were uncertain. I must speak to Eric first, and induce him to reopen communications with his family. I would tell him how his brother grieved over his supposed death, how changed he was; and he should hear, too, of Gladys's failing health and spirits. I should not be wanting in eloquence on that subject. If he loved Gladys he would not refuse to listen to me.

After a time I tried to set aside these thoughts, and to occupy myself with dressing for the evening. We had a dinner-party that night. Mrs. Fullerton and Lesbia were to be of the party. They were going down to Rutherford the next day, so I should have to bid them good-bye.

The evening was very tedious and wearisome to me: my head ached, and the glitter of lights and the sound of many voices seemed to bewilder me. Lesbia came up after dinner to ask if I were not well, I was so pale and quiet. We sat out on the balcony together in the starlight for a little while, until Mrs. Fullerton called Lesbia in. I would gladly have remained there alone, drinking in the freshness of the night dews, but Jill came out and began chattering to me, until I went back with her into the room.

There was very little sleep for me that night. When at last I fell into a dose, I was tormented by a succession of miserable dreams. I was following a supposed Eric down long country roads in the darkness. Something seemed always to retard me: my feet were weighted with lead, invisible hands were pulling me back. I heard him whistling in the distance, then I stumbled, and a black bog engulfed me, and I woke with a stifled cry.

I woke to the knowledge that the sun was streaming in at my windows, and that some sound like a falling plank had roused me from my uneasy slumbers. It must be past six

o'clock, I thought; surely the men must be at work. Yes, I could hear their voices; and the next moment I had jumped out of bed, and was dressing myself with all possible haste.

It was nearly seven when I crept down into the drawing-room to reconnoitre the adjoining house. As I unfastened the window I heard the same sweet whistling that had arrested my attention yesterday.

Without a moment's hesitation I walked out on the balcony. The young painter looked round in some surprise at the sound of my footsteps, and touched his cap with a half-smile.

'It is a beautiful morning,' I began nervously, for I wanted to make him speak. 'Have you been at work long?'

'Ever since six o'clock,' he returned, and I think he was a little surprised at hearing himself addressed. 'We work early these light mornings.' And then he took up his brush and went on painting.

I watched him for a minute or two without a word. How was I to proceed? My presence seemed to puzzle him. Perhaps he wondered why a lady should take such interest in his work. I saw him glance at me uneasily.

'Will you let me speak to you?' I said, in a very low voice, and as he came towards me, rather unwillingly, I continued: 'I know the men call you Jack Poynter, but that is not your name. You are Eric Hamilton; no, do not be frightened: I am Gladys's friend, and I will not injure you.'

I had broken off abruptly, for I was alarmed at the effect of my words. The young painter's face had become ashen pale, and the brush had fallen out of his shaking hand. The next moment a fierce, angry light had come to his eyes.

'What do you mean? who are you?' he demanded, in a trembling voice, but even at the moment's agitation I noticed he spoke with the refined intonation of a gentleman. 'I know nothing of what you say: you must take me for another man. I am Jack Poynter.'

'Oh, Mr. Hamilton,' I implored, stretching out my hands across the balcony, 'do not treat me as an enemy. I am a friend, who only means well. For Gladys's sake listen to me a moment.'

'I will hear nothing!' he stammered angrily. 'I will not be hindered in my work any longer. Excuse me if I am rude to a lady, but you take me for another man.' And before I could say another word he had stepped through the open window.

I could have wrung my hands in despair. He had denied his own identity at the very moment when his paleness and terror had proved it to me without doubt. 'You take me for another man,' he had said; and yet I could have sworn in a court of justice that he was Eric Hamilton; not only his face, but his voice, his manner, told me he was Gladys's brother.

But he should not elude me like this, and I hurried downstairs, determined to find my way into the empty house and confront him again. The fastenings of the hall door gave me a little difficulty. I was afraid Clayton would hear me, but I found myself outside at last, and in another minute I was in the deserted drawing-room.

Alas! Eric was not there: only his paint-pot and brush lay on the balcony outside. Surely he could not have escaped me in these few minutes; he must be in one of the other rooms. At the top of the stairs I encountered a young workman, and began questioning him at once.

'Well, this is a queer start,' he observed, in some perplexity. 'I saw Jack only this moment: he wanted his jacket, for he said he had a summons somewhere. I noticed he was palish, and seemed all of a shake, but he did not answer when I called out to him.'

'Do you mean he has gone?' I asked, feeling ready to cry with disappointment.

'Yes, he has gone right enough; but he'll be back presently, by the time the governor comes round. I wonder what's up with Jack; he looked mighty queer, as though the peelers were after him; in an awful funk, I should say.'

'Will you do me a favour, my man?' and as I spoke a shining half-crown changed hands rather quietly. 'I want to speak to your friend Jack Poynter very particularly, but I am quite sure that he wishes to avoid me. If he comes back, will you write a word on a slip of paper and throw it on to the balcony of 64?—just the words "At work now" will do, or any direction that will find him. I am very much in earnest over this.'

The man looked at me and then at the half-crown. He had a good-humoured, stupid-looking face, but was young enough to like an unusual job.

'It will be worth more than that to you to bring me face to face with Jack Poynter, or to give me any news of him,' I continued. 'You do not know where he lives, for example?'

'No: we are none of us his mates, except Fowler and Dunn,

and they don't know where he lodges: "Gentleman Jack" keeps himself close. But he'll be here sure enough by and by, and then I will let you know,' and with this I was obliged to be content. I was terribly vexed with myself. I felt I had managed badly. I ought to have confronted him in the empty house, where he could not have escaped me so easily. Would he come back again? As I recalled his terrified expression, his agitated words, I doubted whether he would put himself within my reach. I was so worried and miserable that I was obliged to own myself ill and to beg that I might be left in quiet. I had to endure a good deal of petting from Jill, who would keep coming into my room to see how my poor head was. Happily, one of my windows commanded an uncovered corner of the balcony. I could see without going down if any scrap of paper lay there. It was not until evening that I caught sight of an envelope lying on one of the seats.

I rang my bell and begged Draper to bring it to me at once. She thought it had fluttered out of my window, and went down smilingly to fulfil my behest.

It was a blank envelope, closely fastened, and I waited until Draper was out of the room to open it: the slip of paper was inside.

'Jack has not been here all day,' was scrawled on it, 'and the governor is precious angry. I doubt Jack has got into some trouble or other.—Your obedient servant, Joe Muggins.'

CHAPTER XXXIV

I COMMUNICATE WITH JOE MUGGINS

Of course I knew it would be so; Eric had escaped me; but I could not help feeling very down-hearted over the disappointment of all my hopes.

I longed so much to comfort Gladys, to bring back peace and unity to that troubled household. I had nourished the secret hope, too, that I might benefit Mr. Hamilton without his knowledge, and so return some of his many kindnesses to me. I knew—none better—how sincerely he had mourned over the supposed fate of his young brother, how truly he lamented his past harshness. If I could have brought back their young wanderer, if I could have said to them, 'If he has done wrong he is sorry for his fault; take him back to your hearts,' would not Mr. Hamilton have been the first to hold out his hand to the prodigal? Here there was no father; it must be the elder brother who would order the fatted calf to be killed.

I had forgotten Miss Darrell. The sudden thought of her was like a dash of cold water to me. Would she have welcomed Eric? There again was the miserable complication!

All the next day I watched and fretted. The following evening Clayton told me, with rather a supercilious air, that a workman calling himself Joe Muggins wanted to speak to me. 'He did not know your name, ma'am, but he described the lady he wanted, so I knew it was you. He said you had asked him a question about a man named Jack Poynter.'

'Oh, it is all right, thank you, Clayton,' I returned quickly, and I went out into the hall.

Joe Muggins looked decidedly nervous. He was in his work-

ing dress, having, as he said, 'come straight to me, without waiting to clean himself.'

'I made so bold, miss,' went on Joe, 'because you seemed anxious about Jack, and I would not lose time. Well, Jack has been and given the governor the sack,—says he has colic too; but we know that is a sham. My mate saw him in Lisson Grove last night. He was walking along, his hands in his pockets, when Ned pounces on him. "What are you up to, Jack?" he says. "Why haven't you turned up at our place? The governor's in a precious wax, I can tell you. They want him to put on more men, as there's a press for time."—"Well, I am not coming there any more," says Jack, looking as black as possible. "The work doesn't suit my complaint, and I have written to tell Page so." And he stuck to that, and Ned could not get another word out of him: but he says he is shamming, and is not ill a bit. It is my belief, and Ned's too, that he has got into some trouble with the governor.'

'No, I am sure you are wrong,' I returned, with a sigh; 'but I am very much obliged to you for the trouble you have taken. If you hear anything more about Jack Poynter, or can find out where he lives, will you communicate with me at this address?' And I handed Joe my card and a half-sovereign.

'Yes, I'll do it, sure and certain,' he replied, with alacrity. 'Some of us will come across him again, one of these days, and we will follow him for a bit. You may trust me for that, miss. We will find him, sure enough.' And then I thanked him, and bade him good-night.

There was only one thing now that I could do before taking counsel with Gladys, and that was to advertise in some of the London papers. I wrote out some of these advertisements that evening:

'Jack Poynter is earnestly requested to communicate with Ursula G. He may possibly hear of something to his advantage.' And I gave the address of an old lawyer who managed my business, writing a note to Mr. Berkeley at the same time, begging him to forward any answer to Ursula G.

Another advertisement was of a different character;

'For Gladys's sake, please write to me, or give me a chance of speaking to you. An unknown but most sincere friend, U. G.'

The third advertisement was still more pressing:

'Jack Poynter's friends believe him dead, and are in great

trouble: he is entreated to undeceive them. One word to the old address will be a comfort to his poor sister.'

As soon as I had despatched these advertisements to the paper offices, I sat down and wrote to Gladys. It was not my intention to tell her about Eric, but I must say some word to her that would induce her to come home. I told her that I was going back to Heathfield the following afternoon, and that I was beginning to feel impatient for her return.

'I cannot do without you any longer, my dear Gladys,' I wrote. 'There is so much that I want to talk to you about, and that I cannot write. I have heard something that has greatly excited me, and that makes me think that your view of the case is right, and that your brother Eric is alive. Of course we must not be too sanguine, but I begin to have hopes that you may see him again.'

More than this I did not venture to say, but I knew that these few words would make Gladys set her face homeward: she would not rest until she asked me my meaning. As I gave Clayton the letter I felt convinced that before a week was over Gladys would find her way to Heathfield.

I had to give all my attention to Jill after this; but, though she hung about me in her old affectionate way, I felt that I should leave her far happier than she had ever been before, and she did not deny this, only begged me to come and see them sometimes.

'You know I can't do without you, you darling bear,' she finished, with one of her old hugs.

I was still more touched by Aunt Philippa's regret at parting with me; she said so many kind things; and, to my surprise, Uncle Brian relaxed from his usual coldness, and quite warmed into demonstration.

'Come to us as often as you can, Ursula,' he said. 'Your aunt and I will be only too pleased to see you.' And then he asked me, a little anxiously, if I found my small income sufficient for my needs.

I assured him that my wants were so few, and Mrs. Barton was so economical, that but for my poorer neighbours I could hardly use it all.

'Well, well,' he returned, putting a handsome cheque in my hands, 'you can always draw on me when you feel disposed. I suppose you like pretty things as much as other girls.' And he would not let me even thank him for his generosity.

Aunt Philippa only smiled when I showed her the cheque.

'My dear, your uncle likes to do it, and you must not be too proud to accept his gifts: you may need it some day. We have only two daughters: as it is, Jocelyn will be far too rich. I do not like the idea that Harley's child should want anything.' And she kissed me with tears in her eyes.

Dear Aunt Philippa! she had grown quite motherly during those three weeks.

It was a lovely June afternoon: when I started from Victoria there was a scent of hay in the air. Jill had brought with her to the station a great basketful of roses and narcissus and heliotrope, and had put it on the seat beside me that its fragrance might refresh me.

I felt a strange sort of excitement and pleasure at the thought of returning home. Mrs. Barton would be glad to get me back, I knew. Uncle Max would not be at the station to meet me, for he had written to say that he was still detained at Norwich. His cousin was dead, and had left him her little property,—some six or seven hundred a year. There were some valuable books and antiquities, and some old silver besides. He was the only near relation, and business connected with the property would oblige him to remain for another week or ten days. I was rather sorry to hear this, for Heathfield was not the same without Uncle Max.

But not even Uncle Max's absence could damp me, I felt so light-hearted. 'I hope I am not fey,' I said to myself, with a little thrill of excitement and expectation as the familiar station came in view. Never since Charlie's death had I felt so cheerful and full of life.

Nathaniel was on the platform to look after my luggage, so I walked up the hill quietly, with my basket of flowers. As I passed the vicarage, Mr. Tudor came out and walked with me to the gate of the White Cottage. I had a dim suspicion that he had been watching for me.

Of course he asked after the family at Hyde Park Gate, and was most particular in his inquiries after Aunt Philippa. Just at the last he mentioned Jill.

'I hope your cousin Jocelyn is well,—I mean none the worse for her accident,' he said, turning very red.

'Oh no,' I returned carelessly; 'nothing hurts Jill. She was riding in the Park the next morning as though nothing had happened.'

'I remember you told me so, when I called to inquire,' was his answer. 'It was a nasty accident, and might have upset her nerves; but she is very strong and courageous.'

'She has great reason to be grateful to you,' I returned, for I felt very sorry for him. He was hoping that she had sent him some message; she would surely desire to be remembered to him. When I repeated Jill's abrupt little speech his face cleared, and he looked quite bright.

'There is Mrs. Barton looking out for you: I must not keep you at the gate talking,' he said cheerfully. 'Besides, I see Leah Bates coming down from Gladwyn, and I want to speak to her.' And he ran off in his boyish fashion.

I was glad to escape Leah, so I went quickly up the garden-path. The little widow was waiting for me in the porch, her face beaming with welcome. Tinker rushed out of the kitchen as soon as he heard my voice, and gambolled round us with awkward demonstrations of joy that nearly upset us, and Joe the black cat came and rubbed himself against my gown, with tail erect and loud purring.

The little parlour looked snug and inviting. The fireplace was decorated with fir cones and tiny boughs covered with silvery lichen. A great pot of mignonette perfumed the room with its sweetness. Charlie's face seemed to greet me with grave sweet smiles. I seemed to hear his voice, 'Welcome home, Ursula.'

'Oh, I am so glad to be home!' I said, as I went upstairs to my pretty bedroom.

When I had finished my unpacking, and had had tea, I sat down in my easy-chair, with a book that Miss Gillespie had lent me. Tinker laid his head in my lap, and we both disposed ourselves for an idle, luxurious evening. The bees were still humming about the honeysuckles; one great brown fellow had buried himself in one of my crimson roses; the birds were twittering in the acacia-tree, chirping their good-night to each other; the sun was setting behind the limes in a glory of pink and golden clouds, and a mingled scent of roses, mignonette, and hay seemed to pervade the atmosphere.

I laid down my book and fell into a waking dream; my thoughts seemed to take bird-flights into all sorts of strange places; the summer sounds and scents seemed to lull me into infinite content. Now I heard a drowsy cluck-cluck from the poultry-yard,—Dame Partlet remonstrating with her lord; then

a faint moo from the field where pretty brown-eyed Daisy was chewing the cud; down below they were singing in the little dissenting chapel; sweet shrill voices reached me every now and then. I could hear Nathaniel chanting in a deep bass, as he worked in the back-yard, 'All people that on earth do dwell,'—the dear homely Old Hundredth. It was no wonder that a light, very light, footstep on the gravel outside did not rouse me. The door behind me opened, and Tinker turned his head lazily, and his tail began to flop heavier against the floor. The next moment two soft arms were round my neck.

'Gladys,—oh, Gladys!' and for the moment I could say no more, in my delight and surprise at seeing the dear beautiful face again.

'I wanted to surprise you, Ursula dear,' she said, laughing and kissing me. 'How still and quiet you and Tinker were! I believe you were both asleep. When I heard you were coming home I planned with Lady Betty that I would creep down to the cottage and take you unawares. I made Mrs. Barton promise not to betray me.'

'When did you come back?' I asked, bewildered. 'Why did you not write and tell me you were coming?'

'Oh, it was decided all in a hurry. The Maberleys heard that their daughter, Mrs. Egerton, would arrive in England this week, a whole month before they expected her, so they have gone down to Southampton, and left me to find my way home alone. I arrived last night, much to Giles's astonishment. You know Dora is their only surviving child, and she has been in India the last five years. She is bringing her two boys home.'

'Last night. Then you did not get my letter?'

'No; but it will follow me. How good you have been to write so often, Ursula! I have quite lived on your letters.'

'Let me see how you look,' was my answer to this; and indeed I thought she had never looked more beautiful. There was a lovely colour in her face, and she seemed bright and animated, though I could not deny that she was still very thin.

'You have not grown fatter,' I went on, pretending to grumble; 'you are still too transparent, in my opinion; but Jill's snow-maiden has a little life in her.'

'Does Jill call me that?' she returned, in some surprise. 'Oh, I am quite well: even Giles says so. He declares he is glad to have me back, and poor little Lady Betty quite cried with joy. It was nice, after all, coming home.'

'I am so glad to hear you say that.'

'Etta is away, you know: that makes the difference. Gladwyn never seemed so homelike before. By the bye, Ursula, Giles has sent you a message; he—no, we all three, want you to spend a long evening with us to-morrow. He has been called away to Brighton, and will not be back until mid-day; but we all three agreed that it would be so nice if you came early in the afternoon, and we would have tea in the little oak avenue. Etta never cares about these *al fresco* meals, she is so afraid of spiders and caterpillars; but Lady Betty and I delight in it.'

I wish Jill could have heard Gladys talk in this bright, natural way. I am sure she would not have recognised her snow-maiden. There was no weary constraint in her manner to-night, no heavy pressure of unnatural care on her young brow: she seemed too happy to see me again to think of herself at all.

When we had talked a little more I began to approach the subject of Eric very gradually. At my first word her cheek paled, and the old wistfulness came to her eyes.

'What of Eric?' she asked quickly. 'You look a little strange, Ursula. Do not be afraid of speaking his name: he is never out of my thoughts, waking or sleeping.'

I told her that I knew this, but that I had something very singular to narrate, which I feared might excite and disappoint her, but that I could assure her of the certainty that he was alive and well.

She clasped her hands almost convulsively together, and looked at me imploringly. 'Only tell me that, and I can bear everything else,' she exclaimed.

But as she listened her face grew paler and paler, and presently she burst into tears, and sobbed so violently that I was alarmed.

'It is nothing,—nothing but joy,' she gasped out at length. 'I could not hear you say that you had seen him, my own Eric, and not be overcome. Oh, Ursula, if I had only been with you!' And she hid her face on my shoulder, and for a little while I could say no more.

When she was calmed I finished all that I had to tell, and read her the advertisements, but they seemed to frighten her.

'How dreadful if Etta or Giles should see them!' she said nervously. 'Etta is so clever, she finds out everything. I

would not have her read one of them for worlds. Why did you put your name, Ursula?—it is so uncommon.'

'No one will connect me with Jack Poynter. I did not think there would be any risk,' I replied soothingly. 'I put "for Gladys's sake" in the *Daily Telegraph*. You see, we must try to attract his notice.'

'Giles never takes in the *Daily Telegraph*. We have the *Times* and the *Standard*, and the *Morning Post* for Etta. Which did you put in the *Standard*?'

I repeated the advertisement: 'Jack Poynter's friends believe him dead, and are in great trouble: he is entreated to undeceive them. One word to the old address will be a comfort to his poor sister.'

'That will do,' she answered, in a relieved tone. 'Etta cannot read between the lines there. Oh, Ursula, do you think that Eric will see them?'

I assured her that there was no doubt on the subject. All the better class of workmen had access to some club or society, where they saw the leading papers. I thought the *Daily Telegraph* the most likely to meet his eyes, and should continue to insert an advertisement from time to time. 'We must be patient and wait a little,' I continued. 'Even if our appeals do not reach him, there is every probability that Joe Muggins or one of the other workmen will come across him. We want to find out where Jack Poynter lives. I mean to write to Joe in a few days, and offer him a handsome sum if he can tell me his address.'

'That will be the best plan; but, oh, Ursula, how am I to be patient? To think of my dear boy becoming a common workman! he is poor, then; he wants money. I feel as though I cannot rest, as though I must go to London and look for him myself.'

Gladys looked so excited and feverish that I almost repented my confidence. I did all I could to soothe her.

'Surely, dear, it is not so difficult to wait a little, knowing him to be alive and well, as it was to bear that long suspense.'

'Oh, but I never believed him to be dead,' she answered quickly. 'I was very anxious, very unhappy, about him, often miserable, but in my dreams he was always full of life. When I woke up I said to myself, "They are wrong; Eric is in the world somewhere; I shall see him again."'

'Just so; and now with my own eyes I have seen him, evidently in perfect health and in good spirits.'

'Ah, but that troubles me a little,' she returned, and her beautiful mouth began to quiver like an unhappy child's. 'How can Eric, my Eric who loved me so, be so light-hearted, knowing that all these years I have been mourning for him? I remember how he used,' she went on plaintively, 'to whistle over his work, and how Giles used to listen to him. Sometimes they kept up a duet together, but Eric's note was the sweeter.'

'We must be careful not to misjudge him even in this,' was my answer: 'how do you know, Gladys, that he has not assured himself that you are all well, and, as far as he knows, happy? Or perhaps his heart was very heavy in spite of his whistling. A young man does not show his feelings like a girl.'

'No doubt you are right,' she replied, sighing, and then she turned her head away, and I could see the old tremulous movement of her hands. 'Ursula,' she said, in a very low voice, 'have you told Mr. Cunliffe about this?'

'Uncle Max!' I exclaimed, concealing my astonishment at hearing her mention his name of her own accord. 'No; indeed, he is away from home: we have not met for the last three weeks. Would you wish me to tell him, Gladys?'

She pondered over my question, and I could see the curves of her throat trembling. Her voice was not so clear when she answered me:

'He might have helped us. He is kind and wise, and I trusted him once. But perhaps it will be hardly safe to tell him: he might insist on Giles knowing, and then everything would be lost.'

'What do you mean?' I asked hastily. 'Surely Mr. Hamilton ought to know that his brother is alive.'

'Yes, but not now—not until I have seen him. Ursula, you are very good; you are my greatest comfort; but indeed you must be guided in this by me. You do not know Giles as I do. He is beginning to influence you in spite of yourself. If Giles knows, Etta will know, and then we are lost.'

Her tone troubled me: it was the old keynote of suppressed hopeless pain: it somehow recalled to me the image of some helpless innocent bird struggling in a fowler's net. Her eyes looked at me with almost agonised entreaty.

'If Etta knows, we should be lost,' she repeated drearily.

'She shall not know, then,' I returned, pretending cheerfulness, though I was inwardly dismayed. 'You and I will watch

and wait, Gladys. Do not be so cast down, dear. Remember it is never so dark as just before the dawn.'

'No,' she replied, with a faint smile, 'you are right there; but it is growing dark in earnest, Ursula, and I must go home, or Leah will be coming in search of me.'

'Very well; I will walk with you,' I replied; and in five minutes more we had left the cottage.

We walked almost in silence, for who could tell if eavesdroppers might not lurk in the dark hedgerows? I know this feeling was strong in both our minds.

At the gate of Gladwyn we kissed each other and parted.

'I am happier, Ursula,' she whispered. 'You must not think I am ungrateful for the news you have given me, only it has made me restless.'

'Hush! there is some one coming down the shrubbery,' I returned, dropping her hand, and going quickly into the road. As I did so, I heard Leah's smooth voice address Gladys:

'You were so late, ma'am, that I thought I had better step down to the cottage, for fear you might be waiting for me.'

'It is all right, Leah,' was Gladys's answer. 'Miss Garston walked back with me. Thank you for your thoughtfulness.' And then I heard their footsteps dying away in the distance.

CHAPTER XXXV

NIGHTINGALES AND ROSES

I WAS very busy the next morning. I went round to the Marshalls' cottage to see Peggy, and then I paid Phœbe a long visit, and afterwards I went to Robert Stokes.

They seemed all glad to welcome me back, especially Phœbe, who lay and looked at me as though she never wished to lose sight of me again.

When I had left her room I sat a little while with Susan. She still looked delicate, but at my first pitying word she stopped me.

'Please don't say that, Miss Garston. If you knew how I thank God for that illness! it has opened poor Phœbe's heart to me as nothing else could have opened it.'

'She does indeed seem a different creature,' I returned, full of thankfulness to hear this.

'Different,—nay, that is not the word: the heart of a little child has come back to her. It rests me now, if I am ever so tired, to go into her room. It is always "Sit down, Susan, my woman, and talk to me a bit," or she will beg me to do something for her, just as though she were asking a favour. I read the Bible to her now morning and evening, and Kitty sings her sweet hymns to us. It is more like home now, with Phœbe to smile a welcome whenever she sees me. I do not miss father and mother half so much now.'

'If you only knew how happy it makes me to hear you say all this, Miss Locke!'

'Nay, but I am thinking we owe much of our comfort to you,' she answered simply. 'You worked upon her feelings first, and then Providence sent that sharp message to her. And we have

to be grateful to the doctor, too. What do you think, Miss Garston? He is our landlord now, and he won't take a farthing of rent from us. He says we are doing him a kindness by living in the house, and that he only wished his other tenants took as much care of his property; but of course I know what that means.' And here Susan's thin hands shook a little. 'The doctor is just a man whose right hand does not know what his left hand does; he is just heaping us with benefits, and making us ashamed with his kindness.'

'You are a great favourite of his,' I answered, smiling, as I took my leave; but Susan answered solemnly,—

'It won't be forgotten in his account, Miss Garston. The measure running over will surely be returned to him, and not only to him.' And here she looked at me meaningly, and pressed my hand. Poor Susan! she had grown very fond of her nurse.

As I walked up to Gladwyn that afternoon I felt a pleasant sense of excitement, a sort of holiday feeling, that was novel to me. Miss Darrell was away, and Gladys and Lady Betty would be at their ease. We might look and talk as we liked, no one would find fault with us.

I was pleased, too, at the thought of seeing Mr. Hamilton again. I was in the mood to be gay: perhaps the summer sunshine infected me, for who could be dull on such a day? There was not a cloud in the sky, the birds were singing, the rooks were cawing among the elms, the very sparrows had a jaunty look and cheeped busily in the ivy. As I approached Gladwyn, I saw Mr. Hamilton leaning on the gate: he looked as though he had been standing there some time.

'Were you watching for me?' I asked, rather thoughtlessly, as he threw the gate open with a smile and shook hands with me. I had asked the question quite innocently and casually; but the next moment I felt hot and ashamed. Why had I supposed such a thing? Why should Mr. Hamilton be watching for me?

He did not seem to notice my confusion: he looked very glad to see me. I think he was in a gay mood too.

'Yes, I was looking for you. You are a little late, do you know that? I was just meditating whether I should walk down the road to meet you. Come and take a turn with me on this shady little lawn. Gladys and Lady Betty are arranging the tea-table, and are not quite ready for us.'

He led the way to the little lawn in front of the house.

Gladwyn was surrounded with charming lawns: the avenue of young oaks was at the back. We could catch glimpses of Lady Betty's white gown as she flitted backward and forward. The front window of Mr. Hamilton's study was before us.

'Well,' he said, looking at me brightly, 'we are all glad to welcome Nurse Ursula back: the three weeks have seemed very long somehow.'

'Have you any more cases ready for me?' I returned, trying to appear at my usual ease with him. It seemed ridiculous, but I was certainly rather shy with Mr. Hamilton this afternoon. He looked different somehow.

'If I have, you will not know them to-day. I am not going to talk business to you this afternoon. Tell me about your visit: have you enjoyed yourself? But I need not ask: your looks answer for you.'

'I have most certainly enjoyed myself. Aunt Philippa was so kind: indeed, they were all good to me. Did you hear of Jill's accident, Mr. Hamilton? No. I must tell you about it, and of Mr. Tudor's presence of mind.' And I narrated the whole circumstance.

'It was a marvellous escape,' he returned thoughtfully. 'Poor child! she might have fared badly. Well, Miss Garston, the green velvet gown was very becoming.'

I looked up quickly, but there was no mockery in Mr. Hamilton's smile. He was regarding me kindly, though his tone was a little teasing.

'I saw you in the church,' I returned quietly.

'Yes, I suppose there is a kind of magnetism in a fixed glance. I was looking at you, trying to identify Nurse Ursula with the elegantly-dressed woman before me, and somehow failing, when your eyes encountered mine. Their serious disapproval most certainly recalled Nurse Ursula with a vengeance.'

He was laughing at me now, but I determined to satisfy my curiosity.

'I was so surprised to see you there,' I replied seriously: 'you were so strong in your denunciations of gay weddings that your presence as a spectator at one quite startled me. Why were you there, Mr. Hamilton?'

'Do you want to know, really?' still in a teasing tone.

'Of course one always likes an answer to a question.'

'You shall have it, Miss Garston. I came to see that velvet gown.'

'Nonsense!'

'May I ask why?'

'Well, it is nonsense; as though you came for such an absurd purpose!' But, though I answered Mr. Hamilton in this brusque fashion, I was aware that my heart was beating rather more quickly than usual. Did he really mean that he had come to see me? Could such a thing be possible? I began to wish I had never put that question.

'I either came to see the gown or the wearer: upon my honour I hardly know which. Perhaps you can tell me?' But if he expected an answer to that he did not get it: I was only meditating how I could break off this *tête-à-tête* without too much awkwardness. No, I did not recognise Mr. Hamilton a bit this afternoon: he had never talked to me after this fashion before. I was not sure that I liked it.

'After all, I am not certain that I do not like you best in that gray one, especially after I have picked you some roses to wear with it: something sober and quiet seems to suit Nurse Ursula better.'

'Mr. Hamilton, if you please, I do not want to talk any more about my gown.'

'What shall we talk about, then? Shall I——' And then he looked at my face and checked himself. His teasing mood, or whatever it was, changed. Perhaps he saw my embarrassment, for his manner became all at once very gentle. He said we must go in search of the roses; and then he began to talk to me about Gladys,—how much brighter she looked, but still thin, oh, far too thin,—and was I not glad to have her back again? and all the time he talked he was looking at me, as though he wanted to find out the reason of something that perplexed him.

'He will think that I am not glad to be home again, that all this gaiety has spoiled me for my work,' I thought, with some vexation; but no effort of my part would overcome this sudden shyness, and I was much relieved when we turned the corner of the house and encountered Lady Betty coming in search of us.

'Of course we saw you on the little lawn,' she said eagerly, 'but we were too busy arranging the table. Tea is ready now. Where are you going, Giles? Oh, don't pick any more roses: we have plenty for Ursula.'

'But if I wish Miss Garston to wear some of my picking,

what then, Elizabeth?' he asked, in a laughing tone, and Lady Betty tossed her head in reply and led me away; but a moment afterwards he followed us with the roses, and mollified the wilful little soul by asking Ladybird—his pet name for her—to fasten them in my dress. Both the sisters wore white gowns. I thought Gladys looked like a queen in hers, as she moved slowly under the oak-trees to meet us, the sun shining on her fair hair. As I looked at her lovely face and figure, I thought it was no wonder that she was poor Max's Lady of Delight. Who could help admiring her?

She met me quite naturally, although her brother was beside us.

'Have we kept you waiting too long? I thought you would not mind putting up with Giles's society for a little while. Oh, Thornton was so stupid; I suppose he did not approve of the trouble, for he would forget everything we asked him to bring.'

'This is quite a feast, Gladys,' observed Mr. Hamilton gaily. And indeed it was a pretty picture when we were all seated: a pleasant breeze stirred the leaves over our head, the rooks cawed and circled round us, Nap laid himself at his master's feet, and a little gray kitten came gingerly over the grass, followed by some tame pigeons.

There was a basket of roses on the table, and great piles of strawberries and cherries. Gladys poured out the tea in purple cups bordered with gold. Mr. Hamilton held out a beautiful china plate for my inspection. 'This belonged to Gladys's mother,' he said: 'we are only allowed to use it on high days and holidays. Etta was unfortunate enough to break a saucer once: we have never seen the tea-set since.'

I saw Gladys colour, but she said nothing: only naughty Lady Betty whispered in my ear, 'She did it on purpose. I saw her throw it down because she was angry with Gladys.' But, happily, Mr. Hamilton was deaf to this.

I hardly know what we talked about, but we were all very happy. Gladys, as usual, was rather quiet, but I noticed that she spoke freely to her brother, without any constraint of manner, and that he seemed pleased and interested in all she said; and Lady Betty chatted as merrily as possible.

When tea was over we all strolled about the garden, down the long asphalt walk that skirted the meadow, where a little brown cow was feeding, down to the gardener's cottage and the kitchen-garden, and to the poultry-yard, where Lady Betty

reigned supreme. Then we sat down on the terrace by the conservatory, and Mr. Hamilton threw himself down on the grass and played with Nap, as he talked to us.

I could see Leah sewing at her mistress's window, but the sight did not disturb me in the least. Yes, I must be fey, I thought. I could find no reason for the sudden feeling of contentment and well-being that possessed me; in all my life I had never felt happier than I did that evening; and yet I was more silent than usual. Mr. Hamilton talked more to his sisters than to me, but his manner was strangely gentle when he addressed me. I was conscious all that evening that he was watching me, and that my reserve did not displease him. Once, when he had been called away on business, and Lady Betty had tripped after him, Gladys said, with a half-sigh,—

'How young and well Giles looks to-day! He seems so much happier. I wish we could always be like this. I am sure if it were not for Etta we should understand each other better.'

I assented to this, and Gladys went on:

'I wonder if you have ever heard Mrs. Carrick's name, Ursula?'

What a strange question! I flushed a little as I told her that her old friend Mrs. Maberley had put me in possession of all the family secrets. 'Quite against my will, I assure you,' I added; for I always had a lurking consciousness that I had no right to know Mr. Hamilton's affairs.

'Well, it does not matter. I daresay Giles will tell you all about it himself some day. You and he seem great friends, Ursula; and indeed—indeed I am glad to know it. Poor Giles! Why should you not be kind to him?'

What in the world could Gladys mean?

'I was only a child,' she went on; 'but of course I remember Ella. She was very beautiful and fascinating, and she bewitched us all. She had such lovely eyes, and such a sweet laugh; and she was so full of fun, and so high-spirited and charming altogether. Giles was very different in those days; but he reminds me of his old self this evening.'

I made no answer. I seemed to have no words ready, and I was glad when Gladys rather abruptly changed the subject. Leah was crossing the field towards the cottage with a basket of eggs on her arm. As we looked after her, Gladys said quickly—

'Your talk last night seems like a dream. This morning I asked myself, could it be true—really true—that you saw Eric? I have hardly slept, Ursula. Indeed, I do not mean to be impatient; but how am I to bear this restlessness?'

'It is certainly very hard.'

'Oh, so hard! But for Eric's sake I must be patient. I saw the advertisement this morning in the *Standard*. Lady Betty read it aloud to us at breakfast-time; but Giles took no notice. I wished that we dared to tell Mr. Cunliffe about it; he might employ a detective: but I am so afraid of Etta.'

'I think we may safely wait a little,' I returned. 'I have faith in Joe Muggins: a five-pound note may do our work without fear of publicity.'

'If you hear any news, if you can find out where he lives, remember that I must be the first to see him: Giles shall be told, but not until I have spoken to Eric.'

'Do you think that you will be able to persuade him to come home?'

'I shall not try to persuade him,' she returned proudly. 'I know Eric too well for that. Nothing will induce him to cross the threshold of Gladwyn until his innocence is established, until Giles has apologised for the slur he has thrown upon his character.'

'I am afraid Mr. Hamilton will never do that.'

'Then there will be no possibility of reconciliation with Eric, Ursula. If Eric does not come home, if things remain as they are, I have made up my mind to leave Giles's roof. I cannot any longer be separated from Eric: if he be poor I will be poor too: it will not hurt me to work; nothing will hurt me after the life I have been leading these three years.' And the old troubled look came back to Gladys's face. Lady Betty joined us, and our talk ceased, and soon afterwards we went up into the turret-room to prepare for dinner.

After dinner Lady Betty proposed that we should go down the road a little to hear the nightingales; but Mr. Hamilton informed her with a smile that he had a nightingale on the premises, and, turning to me, he asked me if I were in the mood to give them all pleasure, and if I would sing to them until they told me to stop.

I was rather dubious on this latter point, for how could I know, I asked him, laughing, that they might not keep me singing until midnight?

'You ought to have more faith in our humanity,' he returned, with much solemnity, as he opened the piano. Gladys crept into her old seat by me, but Mr. Hamilton placed himself in an easy-chair at some little distance. As the room grew dusk, and the moonlight threw strange silvery gleams here and there, I could see him leaning back with his arms crossed under his head, and wondered if he were asleep, he was so still and motionless.

How I thanked God in my heart for that gift of song, a more precious gift to me than even beauty would have been! As usual, I forgot everything, myself, Gladys, Mr. Hamilton; I seemed to sing with the joyousness of a bird that is only conscious of life and freedom and sunshine.

I would sing no melancholy songs that night,—no love-sick adieux, no effusions of lachrymose sentimentality,—only sweet old Scotch and English ballads, favourites of Charlie's; then grander melodies, 'Let the bright seraphim,' and 'Waft her, angels, through the air.' As I finished the last I was conscious that Mr. Hamilton was standing beside me; the next moment he laid his hand on mine.

'That will do. You must not tire yourself: even the nightingales must leave off singing sometimes; thank you so much. No! that sounds cold and conventional. I will not thank you. You were very happy singing, were you not?'

I could not see his face, but he was so close,—so close to me in the moonlight, and there was something in his voice that brought the old shyness back.

I was trying to answer, when we heard the front door open and some one speaking to Parker. Was that Miss Darrell's voice? Mr. Hamilton heard it, for he moved away, and Gladys gave a half-stifled exclamation as he opened the door and confronted his cousin.

'Where are you all?' she asked, in a laughing voice. 'You look like bats or ghosts in the moonlight. No lights, and past ten o'clock! that is Gladys's romantic idea, I suppose. What a dear fanciful child it is! Lady Betty, come and kiss me! Oh, I am so glad to be home again!'

'Good-evening, Miss Darrell.'

'Good gracious! is that you, Miss Garston? I never dreamt of seeing you here to-night; and you were hiding behind that great piano. Giles, do, for pity's sake, light those candles, and let me see some of your faces.'

But Mr. Hamilton seemed to take no notice of her request.

'What brought you back so soon, Etta?' he asked; and it struck me that he was not so pleased to see his cousin as usual. 'I thought you intended to remain another week.'

'Oh, but I wanted to see Gladys, after these months of absence. I thought it would be unkind to remain away any longer. Besides, I was not enjoying myself,—not a bit. Mrs. Cameron grows deafer every day, and it was very *triste* and miserable.'

'How did you know I was at home, Etta?' asked Gladys, in her clear voice.

Miss DarreH hesitated a moment: 'A little bird informed me of the fact. You did not wish me to remain in ignorance of your return, did you? It sounds rather like it, does it not, Giles? Well, if you must be inquisitive, Leah was writing to me about my dresses for the cleaner, and she mentioned casually that "master had gone to the station to meet Miss Gladys."'

'I see; but you need not have hurried home on my account.'

'Dear me! what a cousinly speech! That is the return one gets for being a little more affectionate than usual. Giles,'—with decided impatience,—'why don't you light those candles? You know how I hate darkness; and there is Miss Garston standing like a gray nun in the moonlight.'

'It is so late that I must put on my bonnet,' I replied quickly; for I was bent on making my escape before the candles were lighted. Never had I dreaded Miss Darrell's cold scrutiny as I did that night.

Gladys followed me rather wearily.

'Well it has been very pleasant, but our holiday has been brief,' she said, with a sigh; and then she laid her cheek against mine, and it felt very soft and cold. With a sudden rush of tenderness I drew it down and kissed it again and again.

'Don't let the hope go out of your voice, Gladys: it will all come right by and by. Only be strong and patient, my darling.'

'I am strong when I am near you, but not when I am alone,' she answered, with a slight shiver; and then we heard Lady Betty's voice calling her, and she left me reluctantly.

I thought she would come back, so I did not hurry myself; but presently I got tired of waiting, and walked to the head of the staircase.

As I looked down on the lighted hall I saw Mr. Hamilton standing with folded arms, as though he had been waiting there some time; at the sound of my footstep he looked up quickly and eagerly, and our eyes met, and then I knew,—I knew!

'Come, Ursula,' he said, with a sort of impatience, holding out his hand; and somehow, without delay or hesitation, just as though his strong will was drawing me, I went down slowly and put my hand in his, and it seemed as though there was nothing more to be said.

I saw his face light up; he was about to speak, when Miss Darrell swept up to us noiselessly with a hard metallic smile on her face.

'Do you know, Miss Garston, Lady Betty tells me that the nightingales are singing so charmingly; she and I are just going down the road to listen to them, if you can put up with our company for part of the way.'

Giles—I called him Giles in my heart that night, for something told me we belonged to each other—said nothing, but his face clouded, and we went out together.

No one heard the nightingales, but only Lady Betty commented on that fact. Miss Darrell was talking too volubly to hear her. She clung to my side pertinaciously, almost affectionately; she wanted to hear all about the wedding; she plied me with questions about Sara, and Jill, and Mr. Tudor. All the way up the hill she talked until we passed the church and the vicarage, until we were at the gate of the White Cottage, and then she stopped with an affected laugh.

'Dear me, I have actually walked the whole way; how tired I am!—and no wonder, for there is eleven chiming from the church tower. For shame, to keep us all up so late, Miss Garston!'

'I will not detain you,' I returned, with secret exasperation.

Mr. Hamilton had not spoken once the whole way, only walked silently beside me; but as he set open the gate and wished me good-night, his clasp of my hand gave me the assurance that I needed.

'Never mind: he will come to-morrow and tell me all about it,' I said to myself as I walked up the narrow garden-path between the rows of sleeping flowers. If I lingered in the porch to watch a certain tall figure disappear into the darkness, no one knew it, for the stars tell no tales.

CHAPTER XXXVI

BREAKERS AHEAD

It was well that the stars, those bright-eyed spectators of a sleeping world, tell no tales of us poor humans, or they might have whispered the fact that the reasonable sober-minded Ursula Garston was holding foolish vigil that night until the gray dawn drove her away to seek a brief rest.

But how could I sleep?—how could any woman sleep when such a revelation had been vouchsafed her?—when a certain look, and those two words, 'Come, Ursula,' still haunted me,—that strange brief wooing, that was hardly wooing, and yet meant unutterable things, that silent acceptance, that simple yielding, when I put my hand in his, Giles's, and saw the quick look of joy in his eyes?

Ah, the veil had fallen from my eyes at last: for the first time I realised how all these weeks he had been drawing me closer to himself, how his strong will had subjugated mine. My dislike of him had been brief; he had awakened my interest first, then attracted my sympathy, and finally won my respect and friendship, until I had grown to love him in spite of myself. Strange to say, I had lost all fear of him; as I sat holding communion with myself that night, I felt that I should never be afraid of him again. 'Perfect love casteth out fear': is not that what the apostle tells us? It was true, I thought, for now I did not seem to be afraid either of Mr. Hamilton's strange stern nature, of the sadness of his past life, or of the mysteries and misunderstandings of that troubled household. It seemed to me I feared nothing,—not even my own want of beauty, that had once been a trial to me; for if Giles loved me how could such minor evils affect me?

Yes, as I sat there under the solemn starlight, with the jasmine sprays cooling my hot cheek and the soft night breeze fanning me, I owned, and was not ashamed to own, in my woman's heart, and with all the truth of which I was capable, that this was the man whom my soul delighted to honour; not faultless, not free from blame, full of flaws and imperfections, but still a strong grand man, intensely human in his sympathies, one who loved his fellows, and who did his life's work in true knightly fashion, running full tilt against prejudices and the shams of conventionality.

Often during the night I thought of my mother, and how she had told me, laughing, that my father had never really asked her to marry him.

'I don't know how we were engaged, Ursula,' she once said, when we were talking about Charlie and Lesbia in the twilight; 'we were at a ball,—Lady Fitzherbert's,—and of course being a clergyman he did not dance, but he took me into the conservatory and gave me a flower: I think it was a rose. There were people all round us, and neither he nor I could tell how it was done, but when he put me into the carriage I knew we were somehow promised to each other, and when he came the next day he called me Amy, and kissed me in the most quite matter-of-fact way. I often laugh and tell him that he took it all for granted.'

'Giles will come to-morrow,' I said to myself, as the first pale gleam came over the eastern sky, 'and then I shall know all about it.' And I fell asleep happily, and dreamt of Charlie, and I thought he was pelting me with roses in the old vicarage garden.

'"And the evening and the morning were the first day,"' were my waking words when I opened my eyes; for in the inward as well as the outward creation, in hearts as well as worlds, all things become new under the grace of such miracle. I was not the same woman that I had been yesterday, neither should I ever be the same again. I seemed as though I were in accord with all the harmonies of nature. 'And surely God saw that it was good,' ought to be written upon all true and faithful earthly attachments. I was expecting Mr. Hamilton, and yet it gave me a sort of shock when I saw him coming up the road: he was walking very fast, with his head bent, but his face was set in the direction of the cottage.

I sat down by the window and took out some work, but my

hands trembled so that I was compelled to lay it aside. It was not that I was afraid of what he might say to me, for my heart had its welcome ready, but natural womanly timidity caused the slight fluttering of my pulses.

The moments seemed long before I heard the click of the gate, before the firm regular footsteps crunched the gravel walk; then came his knock at my door, and I rose to greet him. But the moment I saw his face a sudden anxiety seized me. What had happened? What made him look so pale and embarrassed, so strangely unlike himself? This was not the greeting I expected. This was not how we ought to meet on this morning of all mornings.

As he shook hands with me quickly and rather nervously, he seemed to avoid my eyes. He walked to the window, picked a spray of jasmine, and began pulling it to pieces, all the time he talked. As for me, I sat down again and took up my work: he should not see that I felt his coldness, that he had disappointed me.

'I have come very early, I am afraid,' he began, 'but I thought I ought to let you know. Mrs. Hanbury's little girl, the lame one, Jessie, has got badly burnt,—some carelessness or other; but they are an ignorant set, and the child will need your care.'

'I will go at once. Where do they live?' But somehow as I asked the question I felt as though my voice had lost all tone and sounded like Miss Darrell's.

He told me, and then gave me the necessary instructions. 'Janet Coombe, a servant at the Man and Plough, is ill too, and they sent up for me this morning; it seems a touch of low fever,—nothing really infectious, though; but the men from the soap-works are having their bean-feast, and all the folks are too busy to pay Janet much attention.'

'I will see about her,' I returned. 'Are those the only cases, Mr. Hamilton?' He looked round at me then, as though my quiet matter-of-fact answer had surprised him, and for a moment he surveyed me gravely and wistfully; then he seemed to rouse himself with an effort.

'Yes, those are the only cases at present. Thank you, I shall be much obliged if you will attend to them. Little Jessie is a very delicate child: things may go hardly with her.' Then he stopped, picked another spray of jasmine, and pulled off the little starry flowers remorselessly.

'Miss Garston, I want to say something: I feel I owe you some sort of explanation. I wish to tell you that I have only myself to blame. I have thought it all over, and I have come to the conclusion that it is no fault of yours that I misunderstood you. It is your nature to be kind. You did not wish to mislead me.'

'I am not aware that I ever mislead people,' I returned, rather proudly, for I could not help feeling a little indignant: Mr. Hamilton was certainly not treating me well.

'No, of course not,' looking excessively pained. 'I know you too well to accuse you of that. If I misunderstood you, if I imagined things, it was my own fault,—mine solely. I would not blame you for worlds.'

'I am glad of that, Mr. Hamilton,' in rather an icy tone.

'No, you could not have told me: I ought to have found it out for myself. Do you mind if I go away now? I do not feel quite myself, and I would rather talk of this again another time. Perhaps you will tell me all about it then.' And he actually took up his hat and shook hands with me again. Somehow his touch made me shiver when I remembered the long hand-clasp of the previous night,—only ten or eleven hours ago; and yet this strange change had been worked in him.

I let him go, though it nearly broke my heart to see him look so careworn and miserable. My woman's pride was up in arms, though for very pity and love I could have called him back and begged him to tell me in plain English and without reservation what he meant by his vague words. Once I rose and went to the door, the latch was in my hand, but I sat down again and watched him quietly until he was out of sight. I would wait, I said to myself; I would rather wait until he came to his senses; and then I laughed a little angrily, though the tears were in my eyes. It was vexatious, it was bitterly disappointing, it was laying on my shoulders a fresh burden of responsibility and anxiety. The happiness that a quarter of an hour ago seemed within my reach had vanished and left me worried and perplexed. And yet, in spite of the pain Mr. Hamilton had inflicted, I did not for one moment lose hope or courage.

Something had gone wrong, that was evident. The perfect understanding that had been between us last night seemed ruthlessly disturbed and perhaps broken. Could this be Miss Darrell's work? Had she made mischief between us? I

wondered what part of my conduct or actions she had mis represented to her cousin. It was this uncertainty that tormented me: how could I refute mere intangible shadows?

Strange to say, I never doubted his love for a moment. If such a doubt had entered my mind I should have been miserable indeed; but no such thought fretted me. I was only hurt that he could have brought himself to believe anything against me, that he should have listened to her false sophistry and not have asked for my explanation; but, as I remembered that love was prone to jealousy and not above suspicion, I soon forgave him in my heart.

Ah well, we must both suffer, I thought; for he certainly looked very unhappy, fagged, and weary, as though he had not slept. If he had told me what was wrong I would have found some comfort for him; but under such circumstances any woman must be dumb.

He had made me understand that he did not intend to ask me to marry him, at least just yet; that for some reason best known to himself he wished for no further explanation with me. Well, I could wait until he was ready to speak; he need not fear that I should embarrass him. 'Men are strange creatures,' I thought, as I rose, feeling tired in every limb, to put on my bonnet; but, cast down and perplexed as I was, I would not own for a minute that I was really miserable. My faith in Mr. Hamilton was too strong for that; one day things would be right between us; one day he would see the truth and know it, and there would be no cloud before his eyes. I went rather sadly about my duties that day, but I was determined that no one else should suffer for my unhappiness, so I exerted myself to be cheerful with my patients, and the hard work did me good.

I was tired when I reached home, and I spent rather a dreary evening: it was impossible to settle to my book. I could not help remembering how I had called this a new day. As I prayed for Mr. Hamilton that night, I could not help shedding a few tears; he was so strong, all the power was in his hands; he might have saved me from this trouble. Then I remembered that we were both unhappy together, and this thought calmed me; for the same cloud was covering us both, and I wondered which of us would see the sunshine first.

I do not wish to speak much of my feelings at this time: the old adage, that 'the course of true love never runs smooth,' was

true, alas, in my case; but I was too proud to complain, and I tried not to fret overmuch. Most women have known troubled days, when the current seems against them and the waves run high; their strength fails and they seem to sink in deep waters. Many a poor soul has suffered shipwreck in the very sight of the haven where it would fain be, for man and woman too are 'born to trouble as the sparks fly upward.'

Sometimes my pain was very great; but I would not succumb to it. I worked harder than ever to combat my restlessness. My worst time was in the evening, when I came home weary and dispirited. We seemed so near, and yet so strangely apart, and it was hard at such times to keep to my old faith in Mr. Hamilton and acquit him of unkindness.

'Why does he not tell me what he means? Do I deserve this silence?' I would say to myself. Then I remembered his promise that he would speak to me again about these things, and I resolved to be brave and patient.

I was longing to see Gladys, but she did not come for more than ten days. And, alas! I could not go up to Gladwyn to seek her. This was the first bitter fruit of our estrangement,—that it separated me from Gladys.

Lady Betty had gone away the very next day to pay a two months' visit to an old school-fellow in Cornwall: so Gladys would be utterly alone. Uncle Max was still in Norwich, detained by most vexatious lawyer's business: so that I had not even the solace of his companionship. If it had not been for Mr. Tudor, I should have been quite desolate. But I was always meeting him in the village, and his cheery greeting was a cordial to me. He always walked back with me, talking in his eager, boyish way. And I had sometimes quite a trouble to get rid of him. He would stand for a quarter of an hour at a time leaning over the gate and chatting with me. By a sort of tacit consent, he never offered to come in, neither did I invite him. We were both too much afraid of Miss Darrell's comments.

In all those ten days I only saw Mr. Hamilton once, for on Sunday his seat in church had been vacant.

I was dressing little Jessie's burns one morning, and talking to her cheerfully all the time, for she was a nervous little creature, when I heard his footstep outside. And the next instant he was standing beside us.

His curt 'Good-morning; how is the patient, nurse?' braced my faltering nerves in a moment, and enabled me to answer

him without embarrassment. He had his grave professional air, and looked hard and impenetrable. I had reason afterwards to think that this sternness of manner was assumed for my benefit, for once, when I was preparing some lint for him, I looked up inadvertently and saw that he was watching me with an expression that was at once sad and wistful.

He turned away at once, when he saw I noticed him, and I left the room as quickly as I could, for I felt the tears rising to my eyes. I had to sit down a moment in the porch to recover myself. That look, so sad and yearning, had quite upset me. If I had not known before, past all doubt, that Mr. Hamilton loved me, I must have known it then.

We met more frequently after this. Janet Coombe was langerously ill, and Mr. Hamilton saw her two or three times a lay. And, of course, I was often there when he came.

He dropped his sternness of manner after a time, but he was never otherwise than grave with me. The long, unrestrained talks, the friendly looks, the keen interest shown in my daily pursuits, were now things of the past. A few professional inquiries, directions about the treatment, now and then a brief order to me, too peremptory to be a compliment, not to overtire myself, or to go home to rest,—this was all our intercourse. And yet, in spite of his guarded looks and words, I was often triumphant, even happy.

Outwardly, and to all appearance, I was left alone, but I knew that it was far otherwise in reality. I was most strictly watched. Nothing escaped his scrutiny. At the first sign of fatigue he was ready to take my place, or find help for me. Mrs. Saunders, the mistress of the Man and Plough, told me more than once that the doctor had been most particular in telling her to look after me. Nor was this all.

Once or twice, when I had been singing in the summer twilight, I had risen suddenly to lower a blind or admit Tinker, and had seen a tall, dark figure moving away behind the laurel bushes, and knew that it was Mr. Hamilton returning from some late visit and lingering in the dusky road to listen to me.

After I had discovered this for the third time, I began to think he came on purpose to hear me. My heart beat happily at the thought. In spite of his displeasure with me, he could not keep away from the cottage.

After this I sang every evening regularly for an hour, and always in the gloaming: it became my one pleasure, for I knew I

was singing to him. Now and then I was rewarded by a sight of his shadow. More than once I saw him clearly in the moonlight. When I closed my piano, I used to whisper 'Good-night, Giles,' and go to bed almost happy. It was a little hard to meet him the next morning in Janet's room and answer his dry matter-of-fact questions. Sometimes I had to turn away to hide a smile.

Gladys's first visit was very disappointing. But everything was disappointing in those days. She had her old harassed look, and seemed worried and miserable, and for once I had no heart to cheer her, only I held her close, very close, feeling that she was dearer to me than ever.

She looked in my face rather inquiringly as she disengaged herself, and then smiled faintly.

'I could not come before, Ursula; and you have never been to see me,' a little reproachfully, 'though I looked for you every afternoon. I have no Lady Betty, you know, and things have been worse than ever. I cannot think what has come to Etta. She is always spiteful and sneering when Giles is not by. And as for Giles, I do not know what is the matter with him.'

'How do you mean?' I faltered, hunting in my work-basket for some silk that was lying close to my hand.

'That is more than I can say,' she returned pointedly. 'Have you and Giles had a quarrel, Ursula? I thought that evening that you were the best of friends, and that——' But here she hesitated, and her lovely eyes seemed to ask for my confidence; but I could not speak even to Gladys of such things, so I only answered, in a business-like tone,—

'It is true that your brother does not seem as friendly with me just now; but I do not know how I have offended him. He has rather a peculiar temper, as you have often told me: most likely I have gone against some of his prejudices.' I felt I was answering Gladys in rather a reckless fashion, but I could not bear even the touch of her sympathy on such a wound. She looked much distressed at my reply.

'Oh no, you never offend Giles. He thinks far too much of you to let any difference of opinion come between you. I see you do not wish me to ask you, Ursula; but I must say one thing. If you want Giles to tell you why he is hurt or distant with you,—why his manner is different, I mean,—ask him plainly what Etta has been saying to him about you.'

I felt myself turning rather pale. 'Are you sure that Miss Darrell has been talking about me, Gladys?'

'I have not heard her do so,' was the somewhat disappointing reply, for I had hoped then that she had heard something. 'But I was quite as sure of the fact as though my ears convicted her. I have only circumstantial evidence again to offer you, but to my mind it is conclusive. You parted friends that evening with Giles. Correct me if I am wrong.'

'Oh no; you are quite right. Your brother and I had no word of disagreement.'

'No; he left the house radiant. When he returned, which was not for an hour,—for he and Etta were out all that time in the garden, and they sent Lady Betty in to finish her packing, —he was looking worried and miserable, and shut himself up in his study. Since then he has been in one of his taciturn, unsociable moods: nothing pleases him. He takes no notice of us. Even Etta is scolded, but she bears it good-humouredly and takes her revenge on me afterwards. A pleasant state of things, Ursula!'

'Very,' I returned, sighing, for I thought this piece of evidence conclusive enough.

'Now you will be good,' she went on, in a coaxing voice, 'and you will ask Giles, like a reasonable woman, what Etta has been saying to him?'

'Indeed, I shall do no such thing,' I answered. And my cheek began to flush. 'If your brother is ungenerous enough to condemn me unheard, I shall certainly not interfere with his notions of justice. Do not trouble yourself about it, Gladys. It will come right some day. And indeed it does not matter so much to me, except it keeps us apart.'

Now why, when I spoke so haughtily and disagreeably, and told this little fib, did Gladys suddenly take me in her arms and kiss me most sorrowfully and tenderly?

'One after another!' she sighed. 'Oh, it is hard, Ursula!' But I would not let her talk any more about it, for I was afraid I was breaking down and might make a goose of myself: so I spoke of Eric, and told her that I had written to Joe Muggins without success, and soon turned her thoughts into another channel.

CHAPTER XXXVII

'I CLAIM THAT PROMISE, URSULA'

It was soon after this that Uncle Max came home.

I met Mr. Tudor in the village one morning, and he told me with great glee that they had just received a telegram telling them that he was on his way, and an hour after his arrival he came down to the cottage.

Directly I heard his 'Well, little woman, how has the world treated you in my absence?' I felt quite cheered, and told my little fib without effort:

'Very well indeed, thank you, Max.'

It is really a psychological puzzle to me why women who are otherwise strictly true and honourable in their dealings and abhor the very name of falsehood are much addicted to this sort of fibbing under certain circumstances; for instance, the number of white lies that I actually told at that time was something fabulous, yet the sin of hypocrisy did not lie very heavily on my soul.

When I assured Uncle Max with a smiling face that things were well with me, his only answer was to take my chin in his hand and turn my face quietly to the light.

'Are you quite sure you are speaking the truth? You look rather thin; and why are your eyes so serious, little she-bear?'

'It is such hot weather,' I returned, wincing under his kindly scrutiny. 'And we—that is, I have had anxious work lately. I wrote to you about poor Janet Coombe. It is a miracle that she has pulled through this illness.'

'Yes, indeed: I met Hamilton just now on his way to her, and he declared her recovery was owing to your nursing; but

we will take that with a grain of salt, Ursula: we both know how devoted Hamilton is to his patients.'

'He has saved her life,' was my reply, and for a moment my eyes grew dim at the remembrance of the untiring patience with which he had watched beside the poor girl. It was in the sick-room that I first learned to know him,—when metaphorically I sat at his feet, and he taught me lessons of patience and tenderness that I should never forget until my life's end.

When we had talked about this a little while, Max asked me rather abruptly when Captain Hamilton was expected. The question startled me, for I had almost forgotten his existence.

'I do not know,' I returned uneasily, for I was afraid Max would think I had been remiss. 'Lady Betty is away, and I have only seen Gladys twice since my return, and each time I forgot to ask her.'

'Only twice, and you have been at home more than three weeks,' observed Max, in a dissatisfied voice.

'I have been so engaged,' I replied quickly, 'and you know how seldom Gladys comes to the cottage. Max, do you know you have been here a quarter of an hour, and I have never congratulated you on your good fortune! I was so glad to hear Mrs. Trevor left you that money.'

'I did not need it,' he returned, rather gloomily. 'I had quite sufficient for my own wants. I do not think that I am particularly mercenary, Ursula: the books and antiquities were more to my taste.'

Max was certainly not in the best of spirits, but I did all I could to cheer him. I told him of Gladys's improved looks, and how much her change had benefited her, but he listened rather silently. I saw he was bent on learning Captain Hamilton's movements, and reproached myself that I had not questioned Gladys. I was determined that I would speak to her about her cousin the next time we met.

Max went away soon after this; he was rather tired with his journey, he said; but the next morning I received a note from him asking me to dine with him the following evening, as he had seen so little of me lately, and he wanted to hear all about the wedding.

Of course I was too glad to accept this invitation,—I always liked to go to the vicarage,—and this evening proved especially pleasant.

Max roused himself for my benefit, and Mr. Tudor seemed

in excellent spirits, and we joked Uncle Max a great deal about his fortune, and after dinner we made a pilgrimage through the house, to see what new furniture was needed.

Max accompanied us, looking very bored, and entered a mild protest to most of our remarks. He certainly agreed to a new carpet for the study and a more comfortable chair, but he turned a perfectly deaf ear when Mr. Tudor proposed that the drawing-room should be refurnished.

'It is such a pretty room, Mr. Cunliffe,' he remonstrated; 'and it will be ready by the time you want to get married. Mother Drabble's arrangement of chairs and tables is simply hideous. I was quite ashamed when Mrs. Maberley and her daughter called the other day.'

'Nonsense, Lawrence!' returned Max, rather sharply. 'What do two bachelors want with a drawing-room at all? You and Ursula may talk as much as you like, but I do not mean to throw away good money on such nonsense. We will have a new book-case and writing-table, and fit up the little gray room as your study—and, well, perhaps I may buy a new carpet, but nothing more.' And we were obliged to be content with this.

Max brought out a couple of wicker chairs on the terrace presently, and proposed that we should have our coffee out of doors. Mr. Tudor grumbled a little, because he had a letter to write; but I was not sorry when he left me alone with Max. I really liked Mr. Tudor, but we were neither of us in the mood for his good-natured chatter.

'I think old Lawrence is very much improved,' observed Max, as we watched his retreating figure. 'His sermons have more ballast, and he is altogether grown. I begin to have hopes of him now.'

'He is older, of course,' I remarked oracularly, wondering what Max would say if he knew the truth. 'Well, Max, did you go up to Gladwyn last night?'

'Yes,' he returned, with a quick sigh, 'and Hamilton made me stay to dinner. I have found out about Captain Hamilton. He cannot get leave just yet, and they do not expect him until the end of November.'

'I am sorry to hear that. Do you not wish that you had taken my advice now, and gone down to Bournemouth?' But a most emphatic 'No' on Max's part was my answer to this.

'I am very thankful I did nothing of the kind,' he returned,

a little irritably. 'You meant well, Ursula, but it would have been a mistake.'

'Hamilton told me about his cousin,' he went on; 'but his sister was in the room. She coloured very much and looked embarrassed directly Claude's name was mentioned.'

'That was because Miss Darrell was there.' But I should have been wiser and held my tongue.

'You are wrong again,' he returned calmly. 'Miss Darrell was dining at the Maberleys', and never came in until I was going.'

'How very strange!' was my comment to this.

'Not stranger than Miss Hamilton's manner the whole evening. I never felt more puzzled. When I came in she was alone. Hamilton did not follow me for five minutes. She came across the room to meet me, with one of her old smiles, and I thought she really seemed glad to see me; but afterwards she was quite different. Her manner changed and grew listless. She did not try to entertain me; she left me to talk to her brother. I don't think she looks well, Ursula. Hamilton asked her once if her head ached, and if she felt tired, and she answered that her head was rather bad. I thought she looked extremely delicate.'

'Oh, Gladys is never a robust woman. She is almost always pale.'

'It is not that,' he returned decidedly. 'I consider she looked very ill. I don't believe the change has done her the least good. There is something on her mind: no doubt she is longing for her cousin.'

I thought it well to remain silent, though Max's account made me anxious. If only I could have spoken to him about Eric! Most likely Gladys was fretting because there was no news from Joe Muggins. She was certainly not fit for any fresh anxiety. I felt my banishment from Gladwyn acutely. If Gladys were ill or dispirited, she would need me more than any one.

I think both Max and I were sorry when Mr. Tudor came back and interrupted our conversation. He carried me off presently to show me some improvements in the kitchen-garden; but Max was too lazy to join us, and we had quite a confidential talk, walking up and down between the apple-trees. Mr. Tudor told me that, after all, he was becoming fond of his profession, and that the old women did not bore him quite so much. When we returned, Max was not on the lawn, but a few minutes afterwards he appeared at the study window.

'I was just speaking to Hamilton,' he said. 'He came while you were in the kitchen-garden, but he was in a hurry and could not wait. By the bye, he told me that I was not to let you sit out there any longer, as the dews are so heavy. So come in, my dear.'

I obeyed Max without a word. He had been here, and I had missed him! Everything was flat after that.

I took my leave early, feeling as though all my merriment had suddenly dried up. How would he have met me? I wondered. Would Max have noticed anything different? 'How long will this state of things go on?' I thought, as I bade Max good-bye in the porch.

I waited for some days for Gladys to come to me, and then I wrote to her just a few lines, begging her to have tea with me the following afternoon; but two or three hours afterwards Chatty brought me a note.

'Do not think me unkind, Ursula,' she wrote, 'if I say that it is better for us not to meet just now. I have twice been on my way to you, and Etta has prevented my coming each time. My life just now is unendurable. Giles notices nothing. I sometimes think Etta must be possessed, to treat me as she does: I can see no reason for it. I hope I am not getting ill, but I do not seem as though I could rouse myself to contend with her. I do not sleep well, and my head pains me. If I get worse, I must speak to Giles: I cannot be ill in this place.'

Gladys's letter made me very anxious. There was a tone about it that seemed as though her nerves were giving way. The heat was intense, and most likely anxiety about Eric was disturbing her night's rest. Want of sleep would be serious to Gladys's highly-strung organisation. I was determined to speak to Mr. Hamilton, or go myself to Gladwyn.

My fears were still further aroused when Sunday came and Gladys was not in her usual place. After service Miss Darrell was speaking to some friends in the porch. As I passed Mr. Hamilton I paused for a moment, to question him: 'Why was Gladys not at church? Why did she never come to see me now?'

'We might ask you that same question, I think,' he returned, rather pointedly. 'Gladys is not well: she spoke to me yesterday about herself, and I was obliged to give her a sleeping-draught. She was not awake when we left the house.'

'I will come and see her,' I replied quickly, for Miss Darrell

was bearing down upon us, and I am sure she heard my last words; and as I walked home I determined to go up to Gladwyn that very evening while the family were at church.

I thought I had timed my visit well, and was much exasperated when Miss Darrell opened the door to me.

'I saw you coming,' she said, in her smooth voice, 'and so I thought I would save Leah the trouble. She is the only servant at home, and I sent her upstairs to see if Gladys wanted anything. I hope you do not expect to see Gladys to-night, Miss Garston?'

'I most certainly expect it,' was my reply. 'I have given up the evening service, hearing that she was ill.'

'It is too kind of you; but I am sorry that I could not allow it for a moment. Giles was telling me an hour ago that he could not think what ailed Gladys: he was afraid of some nervous illness for her unless she were kept quiet. I could not take the responsibility of disobeying Giles.'

'I will take the responsibility on myself,' I returned coolly. 'You forget that I am a nurse, Miss Darrell. I shall do Gladys no harm.'

'Excuse me if I must be the judge of that,' she returned, and her thin lips closed in an inflexible curve: 'in my cousin's absence I could not allow any one to go near Gladys. Leah is with her now trying to induce her to take her sleeping-draught.'

I looked at Miss Darrell, and wondered if I could defy her to her face, or whether I had better wait until I could speak to Mr. Hamilton. If Gladys were really taking her sleeping-draught, my presence in her room might excite her. If I could only know if she were telling me the truth!

My doubts were answered by Leah's entrance. Miss Darrell addressed her eagerly:

'Have you given Miss Gladys the draught, Leah?'

'Yes, ma'am, and she seems nicely inclined to sleep. She heard Miss Garston's voice, and sent me down with her love, and she is sorry not to be able to see her to-night.'

I thought it better to take my leave after this, hoping for better success next time. I watched anxiously for Mr. Hamilton the next day, but unfortunately I missed him. When I arrived at Janet's he had just left the house, and I did not meet him in the village. I was growing desperate at hearing no news of Gladys, and had determined to go up boldly to Gladwyn that very evening, when I saw Chatty coming in the direction of

the cottage. She looked very nicely dressed, and her round face broke into dimples as she told me that Miss Darrell had sent her to the station, and that she meant to call in and have a chat with Mrs. Hathaway on her way, as she need not hurry back.

Jem Hathaway was pretty Chatty's sweetheart. I knew him well. He was a blacksmith, and lived with his mother in the little stone-coloured cottage that faced the green. He was an honest, steady young fellow, a great friend of Nathaniel, and Mrs. Barton often told me that she considered Chatty a lucky girl to have Jem for a sweetheart.

'And if you please, ma'am,' went on Chatty, looking round-eyed and serious, 'my mistress said that I was to give you this.' And she produced a slip of paper with a pencilled message. I knew Chatty always called Gladys her mistress: so I opened the paper eagerly:

'Why did you go away on Sunday evening without seeing me? I implored Leah to bring you up when I heard your voice talking to Etta, and when the door closed I turned quite sick with disappointment. Ursula, I must see you; they shall not keep you from me. Come up this evening at half-past seven, while they are at dinner. Chatty will let you in.'

'Very well: tell your mistress I will come,' I observed; and Chatty dropped a rustic courtesy, and said, 'Thank you, ma'am; that will do my mistress good,' and tripped on her way.

I went back into my parlour, feeling worried and excited. Gladys had sent for me, and I must go; but the idea of slipping into the house in this surreptitious way was singularly repugnant to me. I would rather have chosen a time when I knew Mr. Hamilton would be absent; but in that case I might find it impossible to obtain admittance to Gladys's room. No, I must put my own feelings aside, and follow her directions. But, in spite of this resolve, I found it impossible to settle to anything until the time came for keeping my appointment.

I arrived at Gladwyn just as the half-hour was chiming from the church clock. As I walked quickly through the shrubbery I glanced nervously up at the windows. Happily, the dining-room was at the back of the house, but Leah might be sewing in her mistress's room and see me. As this alarming thought occurred to my mind, I walked still more rapidly, but before I could raise my hand to the bell the door opened noiselessly, and Chatty's smiling face welcomed me.

'I was watching for you,' she whispered. 'Leah is in the housekeeper's room, and master and Miss Darrell are at dinner. You can go up to my mistress at once.'

I needed no further invitation. As I passed the dining-room door I could hear Miss Darrell's little tinkling laugh and Mr. Hamilton's deep voice answering her. The next moment Thornton came out of the room, and I had only time to whisk round the corner. I confess this narrow escape very much alarmed me, and my heart beat a little quickly as I tapped at Gladys's door; then, as I heard her weak 'Come in,' I entered.

The room was full of some pungent scent, hot and unrefreshing. Some one had moved the dressing-table, and Gladys lay on a couch in the circular window, within the curtained enclosure. I always thought it the prettiest window in the house. It looked full on the oak avenue, and on the elms, where the rooks had built their nests. There was a glimpse of the white road, too, and the blue smoke from the chimneys of Maplehurst was plainly visible.

The evening sunshine was streaming full on Gladys's pale face, and my first action after kissing her was to lower the blind. I was glad of the excuse for turning away a moment, for her appearance gave me quite a shock.

She looked as though she had been ill for weeks. Her face looked dark and sunken, and the blue lines were painfully visible round her temples. Her forehead was contracted, as though with severe pain, and her eyes were heavy and feverish. When she raised her languid eyelids and looked at me, a sudden fear contracted my heart.

'Ursula, thank God you have come!'

'We must always thank Him, dearest, whatever happens,' I returned, as I knelt down by her and took her burning hand in mine. 'And now you must tell me what is wrong with you, and why I find you like this.'

'I do not know,' she whispered, almost clinging to me. And it struck me then that she was frightened about herself. 'As I told Giles, I feel very ill. The heat tries me, and my head always aches,—such a dull, miserable pain; and, most of all, I cannot sleep, and all sorts of horrid thoughts come to me. Sometimes in the night, when I am quite alone, I feel as though I were light-headed and should lose my senses. Oh, Ursula, if this goes on, what will become of me?'

'We will talk about that presently. Tell me, have you ever been ill in this way before?'

'Yes, last summer, only not so bad. But I had the pain and the sleeplessness then. Giles was so good to me. He said I wanted change, and he took a little cottage at Westgate-on-Sea and sent me down with Lady Betty and Chatty, and I soon got all right.'

'So I thought. And now——'

'Oh, it is different this time,' she replied nervously. 'I did not have dreadful thoughts then, or feel frightened, as I do now. Ursula, I know I am very ill. If you leave me to Etta and Leah, I shall get worse. I have sent for you to-night to remind you of your promise.'

'What promise?' I faltered. But of course I knew what she meant. A sense of wretchedness had been slowly growing on me as she talked. If it should come to that,—that I must remain under his roof! I felt a tingling sense of shame and humiliation at the bare idea.

'Of your solemn promise, most solemnly uttered,' she repeated, 'that if I were ill you would come and nurse me. I claim that promise, Ursula.'

'Is it absolutely necessary that I should come?' I asked, in a distressed voice, for all at once life seemed too difficult to me. How had I deserved this fresh pain!

In a moment her manner grew more excited.

'Necessary! If you leave me to Etta's tender mercies I shall die. But no—no! you could not be so cruel. They are making me take those horrid draughts now, and I know she gives me too much. I get so confused, but it is not sleep. My one terror is that I shall say things I do not mean, about—well, never mind that. And then she will say that my brain is queer. She has hinted it already, when I was excited at your going away. There is nothing too cruel for her to say to me. She hates me, and I do not know why.'

'Hush! I cannot have you talk so much,' for her excitement alarmed me. 'Remember, I am your nurse now,—a very strict one, too, as you will find. Yes, I will keep my promise. I will not leave you, darling.'

'You promise that? You will not go away to-night?'

'I shall not leave you until you are well again,' I returned, with forced cheerfulness. But if she knew how keenly I felt my cruel position, how sick and trembling I was at heart!

What would he think of me? No, I must not go into that. Gladys had asked this sacrifice of me. She had thrown herself on my compassion. I would not forsake her. 'God knows my integrity and innocence of intention. I will not be afraid to do my duty to this suffering human creature,' I said to myself. And with this my courage revived, and I felt that strength would be given me for all that I had to do.

CHAPTER XXXVIII

IN THE TURRET-ROOM

My promise to stay with Gladys soothed her at once, and she lay back on her pillows and closed her aching eyes contentedly, while I sat down and wrote a hasty note to Mrs. Barton.

When I had finished it, I said quietly that I was going downstairs in search of her brother; and when she looked a little frightened at this, I made her understand, in as few words as possible, that it was necessary for me to obtain his sanction, both as doctor and master of the house, and then we should have nothing to fear from Miss Darrell. And when I had said this she let me go more willingly.

My errand was not a pleasant one, and I felt very sorry for myself as I walked slowly downstairs hoping that I should find Mr. Hamilton alone in his study; but they must have lingered longer than usual over dessert, for before I reached the hall the dining-room door opened, and they came out together; and Miss Darrell paused for a moment under the hall lamp.

She was very much overdressed, as usual, in an *eau de Nile* gown, trimmed with costly lace: her gold bangles jangled as she fanned herself.

'Come out into the garden, Giles,' she said, with a ladylike yawn; 'it is so hot in-doors. I thought you said that you expected Mr. Cunliffe.'

'Perhaps he will be here by and by,' returned Mr. Hamilton; and then he looked up and saw me.

'Miss Garston!' he ejaculated, as though he could scarcely believe his eyes, and Miss Darrell broke into an angry little laugh; but I took no notice of her. I determined to speak out boldly what I had to say.

'Mr. Hamilton,' I said quickly, 'I have seen Gladys. I am quite shocked at her appearance: she certainly looks very ill. If you will allow me, I should like to remain and nurse her.'

'But you must allow no such thing, Giles,' interfered his cousin sharply. 'I have always nursed poor dear Gladys myself, and no one understands her as I do.'

'Gladys sent for me just now,' I went on firmly, without taking any notice of this speech, 'to beg me to remain with her. She has set her heart on my nursing her, and she reminded me of my promise.'

'What promise?' he asked, rather harshly; but I noticed that he looked disturbed and ill at ease.

'Some months ago, just before Gladys went to Bournemouth, she asked me to make her a promise, that if she were ever ill in this house I would give up my work and come and nurse her. She was perfectly well then,—at least, in her ordinary health,—and I saw no harm in giving her the promise. She claims from me now the fulfilment.'

'Very extraordinary,' observed Miss Darrell, in a sneering voice. 'But then dear Gladys was always a little odd and romantic. You remember I warned you some time ago, Giles, that if we were not careful and firm——'

'Pshaw!' was the impatient answer, and I continued pleadingly,—

'Gladys seems to me in a weak, nervous state, and I do not think it would be wise to thwart her in this. Sick people must be humoured sometimes. I think you could trust me to watch over her most carefully.'

'Giles, I will not answer for the consequences if Miss Garston nurses Gladys,' interposed Miss Darrell eagerly. 'You have no idea how she excites her. They talk, and have mysteries together, and Gladys is always more low-spirited when she has seen Miss Garston. You know I have only dear Gladys's interest at heart, and in a serious nervous illness like this——' But he interrupted her.

'Etta, this is no affair of yours: you can leave me, if you please, to make arrangements for my sister. I am very much obliged to you, Miss Garston, for offering to nurse Gladys, but there was no need of all this explanation; you might have known, I think, that I was not likely to refuse.'

He spoke coldly, and his face looked dark and inflexible, but I could see he was watching me. I am sure I perplexed and

baffled him that night: as I thanked him warmly for his consent, he checked me almost irritably:

'Nonsense! the thanks are on our side, as we shall reap the benefit of your services. What shall you do about your other patients, may I ask?'

'I will tell you,' I returned, not a bit daunted either by his irritability or sternness. In my heart I knew that he was glad that I had asked this favour of him. Oh, I understood him too well to be afraid of his moods now!

'I must ask you to help me,' I went on. 'Will you kindly send that note to Mrs. Barton. It is to beg her to furnish me with all I need.'

'Thornton shall take it at once,' he returned promptly.

'Thank you. Now about my poor people. Little Jessie still needs care, and Janet will be an invalid for some time. I do not wish them to miss me.'

His face softened; a half-smile came to his lips. 'There is only one village nurse,' he said dubiously.

'True, but I think I can find an excellent substitute. Do you remember my speaking to you of a young nurse at St. Thomas's who was obliged to leave from ill health? She is better now, only not fit for hospital work. I am thinking of writing to her, and asking her to occupy my rooms at the cottage for a week or two until Gladys is better. Change of air will do Miss Watson good, and it will not hurt her to look after Janet and little Jessie.'

Mr. Hamilton looked pleased at this suggestion,—'an excellent idea,' and, as though by an afterthought, 'a very kind one. I did not wish to add to your burdens, but Janet Coombe is hardly out of the wood yet.'

Miss Darrell tittered scornfully. As I glanced at her, I saw she was dragging her gold bangles over her arm until there was a red line on the flesh. Her eyes looked dark and glittering, but she was obliged to suppress her anger.

'Janet Coombe is only a poor servant. The work is not so attractive to Miss Garston, I should think,' she said, in a tone so suggestive that the blood rushed to my face. Women know how to stab sometimes. Happily, Mr. Hamilton's common sense came to my aid. I quieted down directly at the first sound of his voice.

'What makes you so uncharitable, Etta? We all know our village nurse too well to believe that insinuation. If Gladys be

only nursed with half the tenderness that was shown to Janet, I shall be quite content to leave her under Miss Garston's care.' Then, turning to me, with something of his old cordial manner, 'Well, it is all settled, is it not, that you remain here to-night? Is there anything else you wish to say to me?'

'Only one thing,' I replied quietly. 'Will you kindly give orders that Gladys's little maid, Chatty, waits upon the sick-room? Leah seems to have taken that office upon herself lately, and Gladys has a great dislike to her.'

'Really, this passes everything!' exclaimed Miss Darrell angrily. 'What has my poor Leah done, to be set aside in this way?'

'She is your maid, is she not, Etta?'

'Yes; but, Giles——'

'And Chatty always waits on my sisters. It is certainly not Leah's business to wait on the turret-room.'

'Leah,' raising his voice a little, as Leah came downstairs with a tray of linen, 'I want to speak to you a moment. Miss Garston has undertaken to nurse my sister, and all her orders are to be carried out. Chatty is to attend to the sick-room for the future; there is no need for you to neglect your mistress.'

'Very well, sir,' replied the woman civilly; but he did not see the look she gave me. I had made an enemy of Leah from that moment: neither she nor her mistress would ever forgive me that slight.

'If Miss Garston has no more orders to give me,' observed Miss Darrell, with ill-concealed temper, 'I may as well go, for I am rather tired of this, Giles.' And she followed Leah, and we could hear them whispering in the little passage leading to the housekeeper's room.

'You must not mind Etta's little show of temper,' remarked Mr. Hamilton apologetically. 'She is rather put out because Gladys prefers your nursing. Between ourselves, she is a little too fussy to suit a nervous invalid; but she is kind-hearted and means well. I was rather sorry for her just now, but I know how to bring her round.'

'I am no favourite with Miss Darrell,' I returned, wondering secretly at his blind infatuation for his cousin.

'No; it is easy to see that you do not understand each other. Etta was not quite fair to you just now. That is why I spoke so decidedly. I will have no interference with the sick-room: you will have to account to me, but to no one else.'

I did not venture to raise my eyes. I was so afraid they might betray me. How could I repent my trust in such a man? I felt I could wait cheerfully for years, until he chose to break down the barrier between us.

I bade him good-night, after this, and hurried back to Gladys. I had no idea that he was following me. As I closed the door, I said, in quite a gay tone,—

'Well, darling, I always told you your brother was your best friend, and he has proved the truth of my words. I knew we could trust him——' But a knock at the door interrupted me. I felt rather confused when he entered, for I knew I must have been overheard; but he took no notice, and went straight up to Gladys.

'You see, it is to be as you wished,' he said pleasantly, 'and Miss Garston has installed herself here as your nurse. Is your mind easier now, you foolish child?'

'Oh yes, Giles, and I am so much obliged to you; it is so good of you to allow it.'

'Humph! I don't see the goodness much; but never mind that now: you must promise me to do all Miss Garston tells you, and get well as soon as you can. Make up your mind, my dear, that you will try and overcome all these nervous fancies.'

'Yes, Giles,' very faintly.

'You have let yourself get rather too low, and so it will be hard work to pull you up again; but we mean to do it between us, eh, Miss Garston?'

I told him that I hoped Gladys would soon be better.

'Oh yes; but Rome was not built in a day,' patting her hand: we want a little time and patience, that is all.' And he was leaving the room, when her languid voice recalled him:

'I mean to be good, and give as little trouble as possible,—and—and—I should like you to kiss me, Giles.'

I saw a dusky flush come to his face as he stooped and kissed her. I knew it was the first time that she had ever voluntarily kissed him since Eric's loss.

'Good-night, my dear,' he said, very gently; but he did not look at me as he left the room.

I put Gladys to bed after this, with Chatty's help. She was very faint and exhausted, and I sat down in the moonlight to watch her. My thoughts were busy enough. There would be little sleep for me that night, I knew. It was so strange for me to be under that roof,—so strange and so sweet that I should

be serving him and his; and then I thought of Uncle Max, and how troubled he would be to hear of Gladys's illness, and I determined to write to him the next day.

I was rather startled later on, when most of the household had retired to rest, to hear a gentle tap at the door.

Of course it was Mr. Hamilton, and I went into the passage, half closing the door behind me.

'Is she asleep?' he asked anxiously, as he noticed this action.

'No, not asleep, but quite drowsy. I have given her the draught as you wished, but it is singular how she objects to it. She says it only confuses her head, and gives her nightmare.'

'We must quiet her by some means,' he returned; and I saw by the light of the lamp he carried that his face looked rather grave. 'Perhaps you did not know that Etta and I were up with her last night. She was in a condition that bordered on delirium.'

'No; I certainly did not know that.'

'She may be better to-night,' he returned quickly: 'her mind is more at rest. Poor child! I cannot understand what has brought on this state of disordered nerves.'

'Nor I.'

'It is very sad altogether. It is a great relief to me to know you are with her. I must have had a professional nurse, for Etta's fussiness was driving her crazy. Now, Miss Garston,' in a business-like tone, 'I want to know how they have provided for your comfort. Where do you sleep to-night?'

I could not suppress a smile, for I knew that there had been no provision made for my accommodation: the whole household had metaphorically washed their hands of me.

'I shall rest very well on the couch,' I returned, unwilling to disturb him.

'Good heavens!' he exclaimed, looking excessively displeased. 'Do you mean that Lady Betty's room has not been got ready for you? I told Leah myself, as Chatty was in the sick-room; and she certainly understood me. This shall be looked into to-morrow. Leah will find I am not to be disobeyed with impunity. I thought Lady Betty's room would do so well for you, as there is a door of communication, and if you left it open you could hear Gladys in a moment.'

'Never mind to-night,' I returned cheerfully. 'I am quite fresh, and shall not need much sleep. No doubt the room will be ready for me to-morrow.'

'Well, I suppose it is too late to disturb them now; but I feel very much ashamed of our inhospitality.' Then, in rather an embarrassed voice, 'I am afraid I must have seemed rather ungracious in my manner downstairs, but I am really very grateful to you.'

This was too much for me. 'Please don't talk of being grateful to me, Mr. Hamilton,' I returned, rather too impulsively. 'You do not know how glad I am to do anything for you—all.' The word 'all' was added as though by an afterthought, and came in a little awkwardly.

There was a sudden gleam in Mr. Hamilton's eyes; he seemed about to speak; impetuous words were on his tongue, then he checked himself.

'Thank you. Good-night, Nurse Ursula,' he said, very kindly, and I went back to Gladys, feeling happier than I had felt since that afternoon when he had given me the roses.

Gladys was quieter that night; she slept fitfully and uneasily, and moaned a little as though she were conscious of pain, but there was no alarming excitement.

Early the next morning I heard them preparing Lady Betty's room, and once when I went into the passage in search of Chatty I met Leah coming out with a dusting-brush: she looked very sullen, and took no notice of my greeting. Chatty helped me arrange my goods and chattels: as we worked together she told me confidentially that master had been scolding Leah, and had told her she ought to be ashamed of herself, and when Miss Darrell had taken her part he had been angry with her too. 'Thornton says Miss Darrell has been crying, and has not eaten a mouthful of breakfast,' went on Chatty; but I silenced these imprudent communications. It was quite evident that I was a bone of contention in the household, and that Mr. Hamilton would have some difficulty in subduing Leah's contumacy.

I wrote to Ellen Watson that morning, and soon received a rapturous acceptance of my invitation. She would be delighted to come to the cottage and to look after my poor people.

'I am very much stronger,' she wrote, 'but I must not go back to the hospital for two months: a breath of country air will be delicious, and it is so good of you, my dear Miss Garston, to think of me. I am sure Mrs. Barton will make me comfortable, and I will do all I can for poor Janet Coombe and that dear little burnt child.'

I showed Mr. Hamilton the letter, and while he was reading it Chatty brought me word that Uncle Max was waiting to speak to me.

'If you like to go down to him I will wait here until you come back,' he said; and I was too glad to avail myself of this offer, for Gladys seemed more suffering and restless than usual. I found Max walking up and down the drawing-room. As he came forward to meet me his face looked quite old and haggard.

'I am glad you have not kept me waiting, Ursula. I sent up that message in spite of Leah's telling me that you never left the sick-room.'

'Leah is wrong,' I replied coolly. 'Mr. Hamilton insists on my going in the garden for at least half an hour daily, while Chatty takes my place. I cannot stay long, Max, but all the same I am glad you sent for me.'

'I felt I must see you,' he returned, rather huskily. 'Letters are so unsatisfactory; but it was good of you to write, always so kind and thoughtful, my dear.' He paused for a moment as though to recover himself. 'She is very ill, Ursula?'

'Very ill.'

'How gravely you speak! Are things worse than you told me? You do not mean to tell me there is absolute danger?'

'Oh no; certainly not; but it is very sad to see her in such a state. Her nerves have quite broken down; all these three years have told on her, and there seems some fresh trouble on her mind!'

'God forbid!' he returned quickly.

'Ay, God forbid, for He alone knows what is burdening the mind of this young creature: she is too weak to throw off her nervous fancies. She blames herself for harbouring such gloomy thoughts, and it distresses her not to be able to control them. The night is her worst time. If we could only conquer this sleeplessness! I have sad work with her sometimes.'

I spared Max further particulars: he was harassed and anxious enough. I would not harrow up his feelings by telling him how often that feeble, piteous voice roused me from my light slumbers; how, hurrying to her bedside, I would find Gladys bathed in tears, and cold and trembling in every limb, and how she would cling to me, pouring out an incoherent account of some vague shadowy terror that was on her.

There were other things I could have told him: how in that semi-delirium his name, as well as Etta's, was perpetually on

her lips, uttered in a tone sometimes tender, but more often reproachful, sometimes in a very anguish of regret. Now I understood why she dreaded Etta's presence in her room: she feared betraying herself to those keen ears. Often after one of these outbursts she would strive to collect her scattered faculties.

'Have I been talking nonsense, Ursula?' she would ask, in a tremulous voice. 'I have been dreaming, I think, and the pain in my head confuses me so: do not let me talk so much.' But I always succeeded in soothing her.

If I read her secret, it was safe with me. I must know more before I could help either her or him. If she would only get well enough for me to talk to her, I knew what to say; and I did all I could to console Max. But I could not easily allay his anxiety or my own; it was impossible to conceal from him that she was in a precarious state, and that unless the power of sleep returned to her there was danger of actual brain-fever; in her morbid condition one knew not what to fear. Perfect quiet, patience, and tenderness were the only means to be employed. As I moved about the cool, dark room, where no uneasy lights and shadows fretted her weakened eyes, I could not help remembering the comfortless glare and the hot, pungent scents that Miss Darrell had left behind her. Most likely she had rustled over the matting in her silk gown, and her hard, metallic voice had rasped the invalid's nerves. Doubtless there was hope for her now in her brother's skilful treatment, and when I told Max so he went away a little comforted.

CHAPTER XXXIX

WHITEFOOT IS SADDLED

After the first day or so the strangeness and novelty of my position wore off, and I settled down to my work in the sick-room.

Chatty waited upon us very nicely; but Miss Darrell never came near us. Once a day a formal message was brought by Chatty asking after the invalid. I used to think this somewhat unnecessary, as Mr. Hamilton could report his sister's progress at breakfast-time.

When I encountered Miss Darrell on my way to the garden I always accosted her with marked civility; her manner would be a little repelling in return, and she would answer me very coldly. In spite of her outward politeness, I think she was a little afraid of me at that time. I always felt that a concealed sneer lay under her words. She made it clearly understood that she considered that I had forced myself into the house for my own purposes. Under these conditions I thought it better to avoid these encounters as much as possible.

I saw Uncle Max two or three times. He had timed his visits purposely that he might join me in my stroll in the garden. We had made the arrangement to meet in this way daily. Max's society and sympathy would have been a refreshment to me, but we were obliged to discontinue the practice. Max never appeared without Miss Darrell following a few minutes afterwards. She would come out of the house, brisk and smiling, in *grande toilette*, —to take a turn in the shrubberies, as she said. Max would look at me and very soon take his leave. At last he told me dejectedly that we might as well give it up, as Miss Darrell was

determined that he should not speak to me alone: so after that I contrived to send him daily notes by Chatty, who was always delighted to do an errand in the village.

'I can't think what makes Miss Darrell so curious, ma'am,' the girl once said to me. 'She asks me every day if I have been down to the vicarage. She did it while master was by the other afternoon, and he told her quite sharply that it was no affair of hers.'

'Never mind that, Chatty.'

'Oh, but I am afraid she means mischief, ma'am,' persisted Chatty, who had a great dislike to Miss Darrell, which she showed by being somewhat pert to her, 'for she said in such a queer tone to master, "There, I told you so: now you will believe me," and master looked as though he were not pleased.'

As I strolled round the garden in Nap's company I often saw Leah sitting sewing at her mistress's window: she would put down her work and watch me until I was out of sight. I felt the woman hated me, and this surveillance was very unpleasant to me. I never felt quite free until I reached the kitchen-garden.

Mr. Hamilton visited his sister's room regularly three times a day. He never stayed long: he would satisfy himself about her condition, say a few cheerful words to her, and that was all.

His manner to me was grave and professional. Now and then, when he had given his directions, he would ask me if there were anything he could do for me, and if I were comfortable: and yet, in spite of his reserve and guarded looks and words, I felt an atmosphere of protection and comfort surrounding me that I had not known since Charlie's death.

Every day I had proofs of his thought for me. The flowers and fruits that were sent into the sick-room were for me as well as Gladys. I was often touched to see how some taste of mine had been remembered and gratified: sometimes Chatty would tell me that master had given orders that such a thing should be provided for Miss Garston; and in many other ways he made me feel that I was not forgotten.

For some days Gladys continued very ill; she slept fitfully and uneasily, waking in terror from some dream that escaped her memory. I used to hear her moaning, and be beside her before she opened her eyes. 'It is only a nightmare,' I would say to her as she clung to me like a frightened child; but it was not always easy to banish the grisly phantoms of a diseased

and overwrought imagination. The morbid condition of her mind was aggravated and increased by physical weakness; at the least exertion she had fainting-fits that alarmed us.

She told me more than once that a sense of sin oppressed her; she must be more wicked than other people, or she thought Providence would not permit her to be so unhappy. Sometimes she blamed herself with influencing Eric wrongly: she ought not to have taken his part against his brother. '"He that hateth his brother is a murderer." Ursula, there were times, I am sure, when I hated Giles.' And with this thought upon her she would beg him to forgive her when he next came into the room.

He never seemed surprised at these exaggerated expressions of penitence: he treated it all as part of her malady.

'Very well, I will forgive you, my dear,' he would say, feeling her pulse. 'Have you taken your medicine, Gladys?'

'Oh, but, Giles, I do feel so wretched about it all! Are you sure that you really and truly forgive me?'

'Quite sure,' he returned, smiling at her. 'Now you must shut your eyes, like a good child, and go to sleep.' But, though she tried to obey him, I could see she was not satisfied: tears rolled down her cheeks from under her closed eyelids.

'What is it, my darling?' I asked, kissing her. 'Do you feel more ill than usual?'

'No, no; it is only this sense of sin. Oh, Ursula, how nice it would be to die, and never do anything wrong again!' And so she went on bemoaning herself.

I had thought it better to move her into Lady Betty's room. It was a large square room opening out of the turret-room, and very light and airy. I had a little bed put up for my use, so that I could hear her every movement. I told Mr. Hamilton that I could not feel easy to have her out of my sight; and he quite agreed with me.

In the daytime we carried her into the turret-room. The little recess formed by the circular window made a charming sitting-room, and just held Gladys's couch and an easy-chair and a little round table with a basket of hot-house flowers on it. Mr. Hamilton declared that we looked very cosy when he first found us there.

In the cool of the evening, when Gladys could bear the blind raised, it was very pleasant to sit there looking down on the little oak avenue, where the girls had set their tea-table that afternoon: we could watch the rooks cawing and circling about

the elms. Sometimes Mr. Hamilton would pass with Nap at his heels and look up at us with a smile. Once a great bunch of roses all wet with dew came flying through the open window and fell on Gladys's muslin gown. 'Did Giles throw them? Will you thank him, Ursula?' she said, raising them in her thin fingers. 'How cool and delicious they are?' But when I looked out Mr. Hamilton was not to be seen.

Lady Betty wrote very piteous letters begging to be recalled, which Mr. Hamilton answered very kindly but firmly. He told her that Gladys required perfect quiet, that if she came home she would not be allowed to be with her; and when Lady Betty heard that I was nursing her she grew a little more content.

Gladys was always more restless and suffering towards evening; 'her bad thoughts,' as she called them, came out like bats in the darkness. I tried the experiment of singing to her one evening, and I found, to my delight, that my voice had a soothing influence: after this I always sang to her after she was in bed: I used to take up my station by the window and sing softly one song after another, until she was quiet and drowsy.

As I sang I always saw a dark shadow, moving slowly under the oak-trees, pacing slowly up and down; sometimes it approached the house and stood motionless under the window, but I never took any notice.

'Thank you, dear Ursula,' Gladys would say when I at last ceased; 'I feel more comfortable now.' And after a time I would hear her regular breathing and know she was asleep. I shall never forget the relief with which I watched her first natural sleep: she had had a restless night, as usual, but towards morning she had fallen into a quiet, refreshing sleep, which had lasted for three hours.

I had finished my breakfast when I heard her stirring, and hurried in to her; to my delight, she spoke to me quite naturally, without a trace of nervousness:

'I have had such a lovely sleep, Ursula, and without any bad dreams. I feel so refreshed.'

'I am so glad to hear it, dear,' I replied; and, overjoyed at this good news, I went out into the passage to find Chatty, for I wanted Mr. Hamilton to know at once of this improvement. He had been very anxious the previous night, and had talked of consulting with an old friend of his who knew Gladys's constitution.

On the threshold I encountered Miss Darrell.

'Were you looking for any one?' she asked coldly.

'Yes, for Chatty. I want Mr. Hamilton to know that Gladys has had three hours' sleep, and has awakened refreshed and without any nervous feelings. Will you be kind enough to tell him?'

'Oh, certainly: not that I attach much importance to such a transient improvement. Gladys's case is far too serious for me to be so sanguine. I believe you have not nursed these nervous patients before. If Giles had taken my advice he would have had a person trained to this special work.'

'Gladys's case does not require that sort of nurse,' I replied quickly. 'Excuse me, Miss Darrell, but I am anxious that Mr. Hamilton should know of his sister's improvement before he goes out. Chatty told me that they had sent for him from Abbey Farm.'

'Yes, I believe so,' she replied carelessly. 'Don't trouble yourself, Miss Garston: I am quite as anxious as yourself that Giles's mind should be put at rest. He has had worry enough, poor fellow.'

I was rather surprised and disappointed when, ten minutes afterwards, I heard the hall door close, and, hurrying to a window, I saw Mr. Hamilton walking very quickly in the direction of Maplehurst. A moment afterwards Chatty brought me a message from him. He had been called off suddenly, and might not be back for hours. If I wanted him, Atkinson was to take one of the horses. He would probably be at Abbey Farm or at Gunter's Cottages in the Croft.

This message rather puzzled me. After turning it over in my mind, I went in search of Miss Darrell. I found her in the conservatory gathering some flowers.

'Did you give my message to Mr. Hamilton?' I asked, rather abruptly. I thought she hesitated and seemed a little confused.

'What message? Oh, I remember,—about Gladys. No, I just missed him: he had gone out. But it is of no consequence, is it? I will tell him when he comes home.'

I would not trust myself to reply. She must have purposely loitered on her way downstairs, hoping to annoy me. He would spend an anxious day, for I knew he was very uncomfortable about Gladys: perhaps he would write to Dr. Townsend.

It was no use speaking to Miss Darrell: she was only too ready to thwart me on all occasions. I would take the matter

into my own hands. I went down to the stables and found Atkinson, and asked him to ride over to Abbey Farm and take a note to his master.

'I hope Miss Gladys is not worse, ma'am,' he said civilly, looking rather alarmed at his errand; but when I had satisfied him on this point he promised to find him as quickly as possible.

'There is only Whitefoot in the stable,' he said. 'Master has both the browns out: Norris was to pick him up in the village. But he is quite fresh, and will do the job easily.' I wrote my note while Whitefoot was being saddled, and then went back to the house. Miss Darrell looked at me suspiciously.

'I thought I heard voices in the stable-yard,' she said; and I at once told her what I had done.

For the first time she seemed utterly confounded.

'You told Atkinson to saddle Whitefoot and go all these miles just to carry that ridiculous message! I wonder what Giles will say,' she observed indignantly. 'All these years that I have managed his house I should never have thought of taking such a liberty.'

This was hard to bear, but I answered her with seeming coolness:

'If Mr. Hamilton thinks I am wrong, he will tell me so. In this house I am only accountable to him.' And I walked away with much dignity.

But I knew I had been right when I saw Mr. Hamilton's face that evening, for he did not return until seven o'clock. He came up at once, and beckoned me into Lady Betty's room.

'Thank you for your thoughtfulness, Miss Garston,' he said gratefully. 'You have spared me a wretchedly anxious day. A bad accident case at Abbey Farm called me off, and I had only time to get my things ready, and I was obliged to see the colonel first. If you had not sent me that note I should have written to Dr. Townsend. But why did not Chatty bring me a message before I went?'

I explained that I had given the message to Miss Darrell.

'That is very strange,' he observed thoughtfully. 'Thornton was helping me in the hall when I saw Etta watering her flower-stand. Well, never mind; she shall have her lecture presently. Now let us go to Gladys.'

Of course his first look at her told him she was better, and he went downstairs contentedly to eat his dinner. After this Gladys made slow but steady progress: she gained a little more

strength; the habit of sleep returned to her; her nights were no longer seasons of terror, leaving her dejected and exhausted. Insensibly her thoughts became more hopeful; she spoke of other things besides her own feelings, and no longer refused to yield to my efforts to cheer her.

I watched my opportunity, and one evening, as we were sitting by the window looking out at a crescent moon that hung like a silver bow behind the oak-trees, I remarked, with assumed carelessness, that Uncle Max had called earlier that day. There was a perceptible start on Gladys's part, and she caught her breath for an instant.

'Do you mean that Mr. Cunliffe often comes?' she asked, in a low voice, and turning her long neck aside with a quick movement that concealed her face.

'Oh yes, every day. I do not believe that he has missed more than once, and then he sent Mr. Tudor. You see your friends have been anxious about you, Gladys. I wrote to Max often to tell him exactly what progress you were making.'

'It was very kind of him to be so anxious,' she answered slowly, and with manifest effort. I thought it best to say no more just then, but to leave her to digest these few words. That night was the best she had yet passed, and in the morning I was struck by the improvement in her appearance; she looked calmer and more cheerful.

Towards mid-day I noticed that she grew a little abstracted, and when Uncle Max's bell rang, she looked at me, and a tinge of colour came to her face.

'Should you not like to go down and speak to Mr. Cunliffe?' she said timidly. 'I must not keep you such a prisoner, Ursula.' But when I returned indifferently that another day would do as well, and that I had nothing special to say to him, I noticed that she looked disappointed. As I never mentioned Miss Darrell's name to her, I could not explain my real reason for declining to go down. I was rather surprised when she continued in an embarrassed tone, as though speech had grown difficult to her,—she often hesitated in this fashion when anything disturbed her,—

'I am rather sorry that Etta always sees him alone: one never knows what she may say to him. I have begun to distrust her in most things.'

'I do not think that it matters much what she says to him,' I returned briskly; for it would never do to leave her anxious

on this point. 'You know I have provided an antidote in the shape of daily notes.'

'Surely you do not write every day,' taking her fan from the table with a trembling hand. 'What can you have to say to Mr. Cunliffe about me?' And I could see she waited for my answer with suppressed eagerness.

'Oh, he likes to know how you slept,' I returned carelessly, 'and if you are quieter and more cheerful. Uncle Max has such sympathy with people who are ill; he is very kind-hearted.'

'Oh yes; I never knew any one more so,' she replied gently; but I detected a yearning tone in her voice, as though she was longing for his sympathy then. We did not say any more, but I thought she was a trifle restless that afternoon, and yet she looked happier; she spoke once or twice, as though she were tired of remaining upstairs.

'I think I am stronger. Does Giles consider it necessary for me to stop up here?' she asked, once. 'If it were not for Etta I should like to be in the drawing-room. But no, that would be an end to our peace.' And here she looked a little excited. 'But if Giles would let me have a drive.'

I promised to speak to him on the subject of the drive, for I was sure that he would hail the proposition most gladly as a sign of returning health; but I told her that in my opinion it would be better for her to remain quietly in these two pleasant rooms until she was stronger and more fit to endure the little daily annoyances that are so trying to a nervous invalid.

'When that time comes you will have to part with your nurse,' I went on, in a joking tone. But I was grieved to see that at the first hint of my leaving her she clung to me with the old alarm visible in her manner.

'You must not say that! I cannot part with you, Ursula!' she exclaimed vehemently. 'If you go, you must take me with you.' And it was some time before she would let herself be laughed out of her anxious thoughts.

When I revolved all these things in my mind,—her prolonged delicacy and painful sensitiveness, her aversion to her cousin, and her evident dread of the future,—I felt that the time had come to seek a more complete understanding on a point that still perplexed me: I must come to the bottom of this singular change in her manner to Max. I must know without doubt and reserve the real state of her feeling with regard to him and her cousin Claude. If, as I had grown to think

during these weeks of illness, one of these two men, and not Eric, was the chief cause of her melancholy, I must know which of these two had so agitated her young life. But in my own mind I never doubted which it was.

This was the difficult task I had set myself, and I felt that it would not be easy to approach the subject. Gladys was exceedingly reserved, even with me; it had cost her an effort to speak to me of Eric, and she had never once mentioned her cousin Captain Hamilton's name.

A woman like Gladys would be extremely reticent on the subject of lovers: the deeper her feelings, the more she would conceal them. Unlike other girls, I never heard her speak in the light jesting way with which others mention a love-affair. She once told me that she considered it far too sacred and serious to be used as a topic of general conversation. 'People do not know what they are talking about when they say such things,' she said, in a moved voice: 'there is no reverence, and little reticence, nowadays. Girls talk of falling in love, or men falling in love with them, as lightly as they would speak of going to a ball. They do not consider the responsibility, the awfulness, of such an election, being chosen out of a whole worldful of women to be the light and life of a man's home. Oh, it hurts me to hear some girls talk!' she finished, with a slight shudder.

Knowing the purity and uprightness of this girl's nature, I confess I hesitated long in intruding myself into that inner sanctuary that she guarded so carefully; but for Max's sake—poor Max, who grew more tired-looking and haggard every day—I felt it would be cruel to hesitate longer.

So one evening, when we were sitting quietly together enjoying the cool evening air, I took Gladys's thin hand in mine and asked her if she felt well enough for me to talk to her about something that had long troubled me, and that I feared speaking to her about, dreading lest I should displease her. I thought she looked a little apprehensive at my seriousness, but she replied very sweetly, and the tears came into her beautiful eyes as she spoke, that nothing I could say or do could displease her; that I was so true a friend to her that it would be impossible for her to take offence.

'I am glad of that, Gladys dear,' I returned quietly; 'for I have long wanted courage to ask you a question. What is the real reason of your estrangement from Max?' and then,

growing bolder, I whispered in her ear, as she shrank from me, 'I do not ask what are your feelings to him, for I think I have guessed them,—unless, indeed, I am wrong, and you prefer your cousin Captain Hamilton.' I almost feared that I had been too abrupt and awkward when I saw her sudden paleness: she began to tremble like a leaf until I mentioned Captain Hamilton's name, and then she turned to me with a look of mingled astonishment and indignation.

'Claude? Are you out of your senses, Ursula? Who has put such an idea into your head?'

I remembered Uncle Max's injunctions to secrecy, and felt I must be careful.

'I thought that it could not be Captain Hamilton,' I returned, rather lamely: 'you have never mentioned his name to me.' But she interrupted me in a tone of poignant distress, and there was a sudden trouble in her eyes, brought there by my mention of Claude.

'Oh, this is dreadful!' she exclaimed: 'you come to me and talk about Claude, knowing all the time that I have never breathed his name to you. Who has spoken it, then? how could such a thought arise in your mind? It must be Etta, and we are undone,—undone!'

'My darling, you must not excite yourself about a mere mistake,' I returned, anxious to soothe her. 'I cannot tell you how it came into my head; that is my little secret, Gladys, my dear: if you agitate yourself at a word we shall never understand each other. I want you to trust me as you would trust a dear sister,—we are sisters in heart, Gladys,'—but here I blushed over my words and wished them unuttered,—'and to tell me exactly what has passed between you and Max.'

CHAPTER XL

THE TALK IN THE GLOAMING

I HEARD Gladys repeat my words softly under her breath,—she seemed to say them in a sort of dream,—'what has passed between you and Max.' And then she looked at me a little pitifully, and her lip quivered. 'Oh, if I dared to speak! but to you of all persons,—what would you think of me? Could it be right?—and I have never opened my lips to any one on that subject of my own accord; if Lady Betty knows, it is because Etta told her. Oh, it was wrong—cruel of Giles to let her worm the truth out of him!'

'If Lady Betty and Miss Darrell know, you might surely trust me,—your friend,' I returned. 'Gladys, you know how I honour reticence in such matters; I am the last person to force an unwilling confidence; but there are reasons—no, I cannot explain myself; you must trust me implicitly or not at all. I do not think you will ever repent that trust; and for your own sake as well as mine I implore you to confide in me.' For a moment she looked at me with wide, troubled eyes, then she ceased to hesitate.

'What is it you want to know?' she asked, in a low voice.

'Everything, all that has passed between you and my poor Max, who always seems so terribly unhappy. Is it not you who have to answer for that unhappiness?'

A pained expression crossed her face.

'It is true that I made him unhappy once, but that is long ago; and men are not like us: they get over things. Oh, I must explain it to you, or you will not understand. Do not be hard upon me: I have been sorely punished,' she sighed; and

for a few moments there was silence between us. I had no wish to hurry her. I knew her well: she was long in giving her confidence, but when once she gave it, it would be lavishly, generously, and without stint, just as she would give her love, for Gladys was one of those rare creatures who could do nothing meanly or by halves.

Presently she began to speak of her own accord:

'You know how good Mr. Cunliffe was to me in my trouble; at least you can guess, though you can never really know it. When I was most forlorn and miserable I used to feel less wretched and hopeless when he was beside me; in every possible way he strengthened and braced me for my daily life; he roused me from my state of selfish despondency, put work into my hands, and encouraged me to persevere. If it had not been for his help and sympathy, I never could have lived through those bitter days when all around me believed that my darling Eric had died a coward's death.'

'Do not speak of Eric to-night, dearest,' I observed, alarmed at her excessive paleness as she uttered his name.

'No,' with a faint smile at my anxious tone; 'we are talking about some one else this evening. Ursula, you may imagine how grateful I was,—how I grew to look upon him as my best friend, how I learned to confide in him as though he were a wise elder brother.'

'A brother!—oh, Gladys!'

'It was the truth,' she went on mournfully: 'no other thought entered my mind, and you may conceive the shock when one morning he came to me, pale and agitated, and asked me if I could love him well enough to marry him.

'How I recall that morning! It was May, and I had just come in from the garden, laden with pink and white May blossoms, and long trails of laburnum, and there he was waiting for me in the drawing-room. Every one was out, and he was alone.

'I fancied he looked different,—rather nervous and excited,—but I never guessed the reason until he began to speak, and then I thought I should have broken my heart to hear him,—that I must give him pain who had been so good to me. Oh, Ursula! I had never had such cruel work to do as that.

'But I must be true to him as well as myself: this was my one thought. I did not love him well enough to be his wife; he had not touched my heart in that way; and, as I believed at

that time that I could never care sufficiently for any man to wish to marry him, I felt that I dared not let him deceive himself with any future hopes.'

'You were quite right, my darling. Do not look so miserable. Max would only honour you the more for your truthfulness.'

'Yes, but he knew me better than I knew myself,' she whispered. 'When he begged to speak to me again I wanted to refuse, but he would not let me. He asked me—and there were tears in his eyes—not to be so hard on him, to let him judge for us both in this one thing. He pressed me so, and he looked so unhappy, that I gave way at last, and said that in a year's time he might speak again. I remember telling him, as he thanked me very gratefully, that I should not consider him bound in any way; that I had so little hope to give him that I had no right to hold him to anything; if he did not come to me when a year had expired, I should know that he had changed. There was a gleam in his eyes as I said this that made me feel for the first time the strength and purpose of a man's will. I grew timid and embarrassed all at once, and a strange feeling came over me. Was I, after all, so certain that I should never love him? I could only breathe freely when he left me.'

'Yes, dear, I understand,' I returned soothingly, for she had covered her face with her hands, as though overpowered with some recollection.

'Ursula,' she whispered, 'he was right. I had never thought of such things. I did not know my own feelings. Before three months were over, I knew I could give him the answer he wanted. I regretted the year's delay; but for shame, I would have made him understand how it was with me.'

'Could you not have given a sign that your feelings were altered, Gladys? it would have been generous and kind of you to have ended his suspense.'

'I tried, but it was not easy; but he must have noticed the change in me. If I were shy and embarrassed with him it was because I cared for him so much. It used to make me happy only to see him; if he did not speak to me, I was quite content to know he was in the room. I used to treasure up his looks and words and hoard them in my memory; it did not seem to me that any other man could compare with him. You have often laughed at my hero-worship, but I made a hero of him.'

I was so glad to hear her say this of my dear Max that tears of joy came to my eyes, but I would not interrupt her by a word: she should tell her story in her own way.

'Etta had spoken to me long before this. One day when we were sitting over our work together, and I was thinking happily about Max—Mr. Cunliffe, I mean.'

'Oh, call him Max to me,' I burst out, but she drew herself up with gentle dignity.

'It was a mistake: you should not have noticed it. I could never call him that now.' Poor dear! she had no idea how often she had called him Max in her feverish wanderings. 'Well, we were sitting together,—for Etta was nice to me just then, and I did not avoid her company as I do now,—when she startled me by bursting into tears and reproaching me for not having told her about Mr. Cunliffe's offer, and leaving her to hear it from Giles; and then she said how disappointed they all were at my refusal, and was I really sure that I could not marry him?

'I was not so much on my guard then as I am now, and, though I blamed Etta for much of the home unhappiness, I did not know all that I have learned since. You have no idea, either, how fascinating and persuasive she can be: her influence over Giles proves that. Well, little by little she drew from me that I was not so indifferent to Mr. Cunliffe as she supposed, and that in a few months' time he would speak to me again.

'She seemed very kind about it, and said over and over again how glad she was to hear this; and when I begged her not to hint at my changed feelings to Giles, she agreed at once, and I will do her the justice to own that she has kept her word in this. Giles has not an idea of the truth.'

'Nevertheless, I wish you had kept your own counsel, Gladys.'

'You could not wish it more than I do; but indeed I said very little. I think my manner told her more than my words, for I cannot remember really saying anything tangible. I knew she plied me with questions, and when I did not answer them she laughed and said that she knew.

'I have paid dearly for my want of caution, for I have been in bondage ever since. My tacit admission that I cared for Mr. Cunliffe has given Etta a cruel hold over me; my thoughts do not seem my own. She knows how to wound me: one word from her makes me shrink into myself. Sometimes I think she

takes a pleasure in my secret misery,—that she was only acting a part when she pretended to sympathise with me. Oh, what a weak fool I have been, Ursula, to put myself in the power of such a woman!'

'Poor Gladys!' I said, kissing her; and she dashed away her indignant tear, and hurried on.

'Oh, let me finish all the miserable story. There is not much to say, but that little is humiliating. It was soon after this that I noticed a change in Mr. Cunliffe's manner. Scarcely perceptible at first, it became daily more marked. He came less often, and when he came he scarcely spoke to me. It was then that Etta began to torment me, and, under the garb of kindness, to say things that I could not bear. She asked me if Mr. Cunliffe were not a little distant in his manners to me. She did not wish to distress me, but there certainly was a change in him. No, I must not trouble myself, but people were talking. When a vicar was young and unmarried, and as fascinating as Mr. Cunliffe, people would talk.

'What did they say? Ah, that was no matter, surely. Well, if I would press her, two or three busybodies had hinted that a certain young lady, who should be nameless, was rather too eager in her pursuit of the vicar.

'"Such nonsense, Gladys, my dear," she went on, as I remained dumb and sick at heart at such an imputation. "Of course I told them it was only your enthusiasm for good works. 'She meets him in her district and at the mothers' meeting; and what can be the harm of that?' I said to them. 'And of course she cannot refuse to sing at the penny readings and people's entertainments when she knows that she gives such pleasure to the poor people, and it is rather hard that she should be accused of wanting to display her fine voice.' Oh, you may be sure that I took your part. Of course it is a pity folks should believe such things, but I hope I made them properly ashamed of themselves."

'You may imagine how uneasy these innuendoes made me. You know my sensitiveness, and how prone I am to exaggerate things. It seemed to me that more lay behind the margin of her words; and I was not wrong.

'In a little while there were other things hinted to me, but very gently. Ah, she was kind enough to me in those days. Did I not think that I was a little too imprudent and unreserved in my manner to Mr. Cunliffe? She hated to make me un-

comfortable, and of course I was so innocent that I meant no harm ; but men were peculiar, especially a man like Mr. Cunliffe: she was afraid he might notice my want of self-control.

'"You do not see yourself, Gladys," she said, once ; "a child would find out that you are over head and ears in love with him. Perhaps it would not matter so much under other circumstances, but I confess I am a little uneasy. His manner was very cold and strange last night: he seemed afraid to trust himself alone with you. Do be careful, my dear. Suppose, after all, his feelings are changed, and that he fears to tell you so?"

'Ursula, can you not understand the slow torture of these days and weeks, the first insidious doubts, the increasing fears, that seemed to be corroborated day by day? Yes, it was not my fancy; Etta was right; he was certainly changed ; he no longer loved me.

'In desperation I acted upon her advice, and resigned my parish work. It seemed to me that I was parting with the last shred of my happiness when I did so. I made weak health my excuse, and indeed I was far from well ; but I had the anguish of seeing the unspoken reproach in Mr. Cunliffe's eyes: he thought me cowardly, vacillating ; he was disappointed in me.

'It was the end of April by this time, and in a week or two the day would come when he would have to speak to me again. Would you believe it?—but no, you could not dream that I was so utterly mad and foolish,—but in spite of all this wretchedness I still hoped. The day came and passed, and he never came near me, and the next day, and the next ; and then I knew that Etta was right,—his love for me was gone.'

'You believed this, Gladys?' but I dared not say more : my promise to Max fettered me.

'How could I doubt it?' she returned, looking at me with dry, miserable eyes ; and I seemed to realise then all her pain and humiliation. 'His not coming to me at the appointed time was to be a sign between us that he had changed his mind. Did I not tell him so with my own lips? did I not say to him that he was free as air, and that no possible blame could attach itself to him if he failed to come? Do you suppose that I did not mean those words?'

'Could you not have given him the benefit of a doubt?' I returned. 'Perhaps your manner too was changed and made him lose hope: the resignation of all your work in the parish must have discouraged him, surely.'

'Still, he would have come to me and told me so,' she replied quickly. 'He is not weak or wanting in moral courage: if he had not changed to me he would have come.

'I have never had hope since that day,' she went on mournfully. 'He is very kind to me,—very; but it is only the kindness of a friend. He tries to hide from me how much he is disappointed in me, how I have failed to come up to his standard; but of course I see it. But for Etta I should have resumed my work. You were present when he nearly persuaded me to do so; I was longing then to please him; I think it would be a consolation to me if I could do something, however humble, to help him; but Etta always prevents me from doing so. She has taken all my work, and I do not think she wants to give it up, and she makes me ready to sink through the floor with the things she says. I dare not open my lips to Mr. Cunliffe in her presence; she always says afterwards how anxious I looked, or how he must have noticed my agitation: if I ever came down to see you, Ursula, she used to declare angrily that I only went in the hope of meeting him. She thinks nothing of telling me that I am so weak that she must protect me in spite of myself, and sometimes she implies that he sees it all and pities me, and that he has hinted as much to her. Oh, Ursula, what is the matter?' for I had pushed away my chair and was walking up and down the room, unable to endure my irritated feelings. She had suffered all this ignominy and prolonged torture under which her nerves had given way, and now Max's ridiculous scruples hindered me from giving her a word of comfort. Why could I not say to her, 'You are wrong: you have been deceived; Max has never swerved for one instant from his love to you?' And yet I must not say it.

'I cannot sit down! I cannot bear it!' I exclaimed recklessly, quite forgetting how necessary it was to keep her quiet; but she put out her hand to me with such a beautiful sad smile.

'Yes, you must sit down and listen to what I have to say: I will not have you so disturbed about this miserable affair, dear. The pain is better now; one cannot suffer in that way for ever. I do not regret that I have learned to love Max, even though that love is to bring me unhappiness in this world. He is worthy of all I can give him, and one day in the better life what is wrong will be put right; I always tell myself this when I hear people's lives are disappointed: my illness has taught me this.'

I did not trust myself to reply, and then all at once a thought came to me: 'Gladys, when I mentioned Captain Hamilton's name just now—I mean at the commencement of our conversation—why did you seem so troubled? He is nothing to you, and yet the very mention of his name excited you. This perplexes me.'

She hesitated for a moment, as though she feared to answer: 'I know I can trust you, Ursula; but will it be right to do so? I mean, for other people's sake. But, still, if Etta be talking about him——' She paused, and seemed absorbed in some puzzling problem.

'You write to him very often,' I hazarded at last, for she did not seem willing to speak.

'Who told you that?' she returned quickly. 'Claude is my cousin,—at least step-cousin,—but we are very intimate: there can be no harm in writing to him.'

'No, of course not: but if people misconstrue your correspondence?'

'I cannot help that,' rather despondently; 'and I do not see that it matters now; but still I will tell you, Ursula. Claude is in love with Lady Betty.'

'With Lady Betty?'

'Yes, and Giles does not know. Etta did not for a long time, but she found out about it, and since then poor Lady Betty has had no peace. You see the poor children consider themselves engaged, but Lady Betty will not let Claude speak to Giles until he has promotion. She has got an idea that he would not allow of the engagement; it sounds wrong, I feel that; but in our unhappy household things are wrong.'

'And Miss Darrell knows?'

'Yes; but we never could tell how she found it out: Claude corresponds with me, and Lady Betty only puts in an occasional letter; she is so dreadfully frightened, poor little thing! for fear her secret should be discovered. We think that Etta must have opened one of my letters; anyhow, she knows all there is to know, and she holds her knowledge as a rod over the poor child. She has promised to keep her counsel and not tell Giles; but when she is in one of her tempers she threatens to speak to him. Then she is always hinting things before him just to tease or punish Lady Betty, but happily he takes no notice. When you said what you did I was afraid she had made up her mind to keep silence no longer.'

'Why do you think your brother would object to Captain Hamilton?' I asked, trying to conceal my relief at her words.

'He would object to the long concealment,' she returned gravely. 'But from the first I wanted Lady Betty to be open about it; but nothing would induce her to let Claude write to him. Our only plan now is to wait for Claude to speak to him when he arrives in November. Nothing need be said about the past: Claude has been wounded, and will get promotion, and Giles thinks well of him.'

She seemed a little weary by this time, and our talk had lasted long enough; but there was still one thing I must ask her.

'Gladys, you said you trusted me just now. I am going to put that trust to the proof. All that has passed between us is sacred, and shall never cross my lips. On my womanly honour I can promise you that; but I make one reservation,—what you have just told me about Captain Hamilton.'

She looked at me with an expression of incredulous alarm.

'What can you mean, Ursula? Surely not to repeat a single word about Claude?'

'I only mean to mention to one person, with whom the knowledge will be as safe as it will be with me, that Lady Betty is engaged to your cousin Claude.'

'You will tell Mr. Cunliffe,' she replied, becoming very pale again. 'I forbid it, Ursula!' But I hindered all further remonstrance on her part, by throwing my arms round her and begging her with tears in my eyes, and with all the earnestness of which I was capable, to trust me as I would trust her in such a case.

'Listen to me,' I continued imploringly. 'Have I ever failed or disappointed you? have I ever been untrue to you in word or deed? Do you think I am a woman who would betray the sacred confidence of another woman?'

'No, of course not; but——' Here my hand resolutely closed her lips.

'Then say to me, "I trust you, Ursula, as I would trust my own soul. I know no word would pass your lips that if I were standing by you I should wish unuttered." Say this to me, Gladys, and I shall know you love me.'

She trembled, and turned still paler.

'Why need he know it? What can he have to do with Lady Betty?' she said irresolutely.

'Leave that to me,' was my firm answer: 'I am waiting for you to say those words, Gladys.' Then she put down her head on my shoulder, weeping bitterly.

'Yes, yes, I will trust you. In the whole world I have only you, Ursula, and you have been good to me.' And, as I soothed and comforted her, she clung to me like a tired child.

CHAPTER XLI

'AT FIVE O'CLOCK IN THE MORNING'

I PASSED a wakeful and anxious night, pondering over this strange recital that seemed to me to corroborate Max's account. I had no doubt in my own mind as to the treachery that had alienated these two hearts. I knew too well the subtle power of the smooth false tongue that had done this mischief; but the motive for all this evil-doing baffled me. 'What is her reason for trying to separate them?' I asked myself, but always fruitlessly. 'Why does she dislike this poor girl, who has never harmed her? Why does she render her life miserable? It is she who has sown discord between Mr. Hamilton and myself. Ah, I know that well, but I am powerless to free either him or myself at present. Still, one can detect a motive for that. She has always disliked me, and she is jealous of her position. If Mr. Hamilton married she could not remain in his house; no wife could brook such interference. She knows this, and it is her interest to prevent him from marrying. All this is clear enough; but in the case of poor Gladys?' But here again was the old tangle and perplexity.

I was not surprised that Gladys slept little that night: no doubt agitating thoughts kept her restless. Towards morning she grew quieter, and sank into a heavy sleep that I knew would last for two or three hours. I had counted on this, and had laid my plan accordingly.

I must see Uncle Max at once, and she must not know that I had seen him. In her weak state any suspense must be avoided. The few words that I might permit myself to say to him must be spoken without her knowledge.

I knew that in the summer Max was a very early riser. He would often be at work in his garden by six, and now and then he would start for a long country walk,—'just to see Dame Earth put the finishing-touches to her toilet,' he would say. But five had not struck when I slipped into Chatty's room half dressed. The girl looked at me with round sleepy eyes as I called her in a low voice.

'Chatty, it is very early, not quite five, but I want you to get up and dress yourself as quietly as you can and come into the turret-room. I am going out, and I do not want to wake anybody, and you understand the fastenings of the front door. I am afraid I should only bungle at them.'

'You are going out, ma'am!' in an astonished voice. Chatty was thoroughly awake now.

'Yes, I am sorry to disturb you, but I do not want Miss Gladys to miss me. I shall not be long, but it is some business that I must do.' And then I crept back to the turret-room.

Leah slept in a little room at the end of the passage, and I was very unwilling that any unusual sound should reach her ears. Chatty seemed to share this feeling, for when she joined me presently she was carrying her shoes in her hands. 'I can't help making a noise,' she said apologetically; 'and so I crept down the passage in my stockings. If you are ready, ma'am, I will come and let you out.'

I stood by, rather nervously, as Chatty manipulated the intricate fastenings. I asked her to replace them as soon as I had gone, and to come down in about half an hour and open the door leading to the garden. 'I will return that way, and they will only think I have taken an early stroll,' I observed. I was rather sorry to resort to this small subterfuge before Chatty, but the girl had implicit trust in me, and evidently thought no harm; she only smiled and nodded; and as I lingered for a moment on the gravel path I heard the bolt shoot into its place.

It was only half-past five, and I walked on leisurely. I had not been farther than the garden for three weeks, and the sudden sense of freedom and space was exhilarating.

It was a lovely morning. A dewy freshness seemed on everything; the birds were singing deliciously; the red curtains were drawn across the windows of the Man and Plough; a few white geese waddled slowly across the green; some brown speckled hens were feeding under the horse-trough; a goat

browsing by the roadside looked up, quite startled, as I passed him, and butted slowly at me in a reflective manner. There was a scent of sweet-brier, of tall perfumy lilies and spicy carnations from the gardens. I looked at the windows of the houses I passed, but the blinds were drawn, and the bees and the flowers were the only waking things there. The village seemed asleep, until I turned the corner, and there, coming out of the vicarage gate, was Uncle Max himself. He was walking along slowly, with his old felt hat in his hand, reading his little Greek Testament as he walked, and the morning sun shining on his uncovered head and his brown beard.

He did not see me until I was close to him, and then he started, and an expression of fear crossed his face.

'Ursula, my dear, were you coming to the vicarage? Nothing is wrong, I hope?' looking at me anxiously.

'Wrong! what should be wrong on such a morning?' I returned playfully. 'Is it not delicious? The air is like champagne; only champagne never had the scent of those flowers in it. The world is just a big dewy bouquet. It is good only to be alive on such a morning.'

Max put his Greek Testament in his pocket and regarded me dubiously.

'Were you not coming to meet me, then? It is not a quarter to six yet. Rather early for an aimless stroll, is it not, my dear?'

'Oh yes, I was coming to meet you,' I returned carelessly. 'I thought you would be at work in the garden. Max, you are eying me suspiciously: you think I have something important to tell you. Now you must not be disappointed; I have very little to say, and I cannot answer questions; but there is one thing, I have found out all you wish to know about Captain Hamilton.'

It was sad to see the quick change in his face,—the sudden cloud that crossed it at the mention of the man whom he regarded as his rival. He did not speak; not a question came from his lips; but he listened as though my next word might be the death-warrant to his hopes.

'Max, do not look like that: there is no cause for fear. It is a great secret, and you must never speak of it, even to me,—but Lady Betty is engaged to her cousin Claude.'

For a moment he stared at me incredulously. 'Impossible! you must have been deceived,' I heard him mutter.

'On the contrary, I leave other people to be duped,' was my somewhat cool answer. 'You need not doubt my news: Gladys is my informant: only, as I have just told you, it is a great secret. Mr. Hamilton is not to know yet, and Gladys writes most of the letters. Poor little Lady Betty is in constant terror that she will be found out, and they are waiting until Captain Hamilton has promotion and comes home in November.'

He had not lost one word that I said: as he stood there, bareheaded, in the morning sunshine that was tingeing his beard with gold, I heard his low, fervent 'Thank God! then it was not that'; but when he turned to me his face was radiant, his eyes bright and vivid; there was renewed hope and energy in his aspect.

'Ursula, you have come like the dove with the olive-branch. Is this really true? It was good of you to come and tell me this.'

'I do not see the goodness, Max.'

'Well, perhaps not; but you have made me your debtor. I like to owe this to you,—my first gleam of hope. Now, you must tell me one thing. Does Miss Darrell know of this engagement?'

'She does.'

'Stop a moment: I feel myself getting confused here. I am to ask no questions: you can tell me nothing more. But I must make this clear to myself: How long has she known, Ursula? a day? a week?'

'Suppose you substitute the word months,' I observed scornfully. 'I know no dates, but Miss Darrell has most certainly been acquainted with her cousin's engagement for months.'

'Oh, this is worse than I thought,' he returned, in a troubled tone. 'This is almost too terrible to believe. She has known all I suffered on that man's account, and yet she never undeceived me. Can women be so cruel? Why did she not come to me and say frankly, "I have made a mistake; I have unintentionally misled you: it is Lady Betty, not Gladys, who is in love with her cousin"? Good heavens! to leave me in this ignorance, and never to say the word that would put me out of my misery!'

I was silent, though silence was a torture to me. Even now the extent of Miss Darrell's duplicity had not clearly dawned on him. He complained that she had left him to suffer through ignorance of the truth; but the idea had not yet entered his

mind that possibly she had deceived him from the first. 'Oh, the stupidity and slowness of these honourable men where a woman is concerned!' I groaned to myself; but my promise to Gladys kept me silent.

'It was too bad of her, was it not?' he said, appealing to me for sympathy; but I turned a deaf ear to this.

'Max, confess that you were wrong not to have taken my advice and gone down to Bournemouth: you might have spared yourself months of suspense.'

'Do you mean——' And then he reddened and stroked his beard nervously; but I finished his sentence for him: he should not escape what I had to say to him.

'It is so much easier to come to an understanding face to face; but you would not take my advice, and the opportunity is gone. Gladys is in the turret-room: you could not gain admittance to her without difficulty: what you have to say must be said by letter; but you might trust that letter to me, Max.'

He understood me in a moment. I could see the quick look of joy in his eyes. I had not betrayed Gladys, I had adhered strictly to my word that I would only speak of Lady Betty's engagement; and with his usual delicacy Max had put no awkward questions to me: he had respected my scruples, and kept his burning curiosity to himself. But he would not have been a man if he had not read some deeper meaning under my silence: he told me afterwards that the happy look in my eyes told him the truth.

So he merely said very quietly, 'You were right, and I was wrong, Ursula: I own my fault. But I will write now: I owe Miss Hamilton some explanation. When the letter is ready, how am I to put it into your hands?'

'Oh,' I answered in a matter-of-fact way, as though we were speaking of some ordinary note, and it was not an offer of marriage from a penitent lover, 'when you have finished talking to Miss Darrell,—you will enjoy her conversation, I am sure, Max; it will be both pleasant and profitable,—you might mention casually that there was something you wanted to say to your niece Ursula, and would she kindly ask that young person to step down to you for a minute? and then, you see, that little bit of business will be done.'

'Yes, I see; but——' but here Max hesitated—'but the answer, Ursula?'

'Oh, the answer!' in an off-hand manner; 'you must not

be looking for that yet. My patient must not be hurried or flurried: you must give her plenty of time. In a day or two —well, perhaps, I might find an early stroll conducive to my health; these mornings are so beautiful; and—— Nonsense, Max! I would do more than this for you'; for quiet, undemonstrative Max had actually taken my hand and lifted it to his lips in token of his gratitude.

After this we walked back in the direction of Gladwyn, and nothing more was said about the letter. We listened to the rooks cawing from the elms, and we stood and watched a lark rising from the long meadow before Maplehurst and singing as though its little throat would burst with its concentrated ecstasy of song; and when I asked Max if he did not think the world more beautiful than usual that morning, he smiled, and suddenly quoted Tennyson's lines, in a voice musical with happiness:

> 'All the land in flowery squares,
> Beneath a broad and equal-flowing wind,
> Smelt of the coming summer, as one large cloud
> Drew downward; but all else of heaven was pure
> Up to the sun, and May from verge to verge,
> And May with me from heel to heel.'

'Yes, but, Max, it is July now. The air is too mellow for spring. Your quotation is not quite apt.'

'Oh, you are realistic; but it fits well enough. Do you not remember how the poem goes on?

> "The garden stretches southward. In the midst
> A cedar spread its dark-green layers of shrub.
> The garden-glasses shone, and momently
> The twinkling laurel scattered silver lights."

I always think of Gladwyn when I read that description.

I laughed mischievously: 'I am sorry to leave you just as you are in a poetical vein; but I must positively go in. Good-bye, Max.' I felt I had lingered a little too long when I saw the blinds raised in Mr. Hamilton's study. But apparently the room was empty. I sauntered past it leisurely, and walked down the asphalt path. On my return I picked one or two roses, wet with dew. As I raised my head from gathering them I saw Leah standing at the side door watching me.

'Oh, it was you,' she grumbled. 'I thought one of those girls had left the door unlocked. A pretty piece of carelessness

that would have been to reach the master's ears! You are out early, ma'am.'

I was somewhat surprised at these remarks, for Leah had made a point of always passing me in sullen silence since I had refused her admittance into the sick-room. Her manner was hardly civil now, but I thought it best to answer her pleasantly.

'Yes, Leah, I have taken my stroll early. It was very warm last night, and I did not sleep well. There is nothing so refreshing as a morning walk after a bad night. I am going to take these roses to Miss Gladys.' But she tossed her head and muttered something about people being mighty pleasant all of a sudden. And, seeing her in this mood, I walked away. She was a bad-tempered, coarse-natured woman, and I could not understand why Mr. Hamilton seemed so blind to her defects. 'I suppose he never sees her; that is one reason,' I thought, as I carried up my roses.

Gladys was still asleep. I had finished my breakfast, and had helped Chatty arrange the turret-room for the day, when I heard the long-drawn sigh that often preluded Gladys's waking. I hastened to her side, and found her leaning on her elbow looking at my roses.

'They used to grow in the vicarage garden,' she said wistfully. 'Dark crimson ones like these. I have been dreaming.' And then she stopped and flung herself back wearily on her pillow. 'Why must one ever wake from such dreams?' she finished, with the old hopeless ring in her voice.

'What was the dream, dear?' I asked, smoothing her hair caressingly. It was fine, soft hair, like an infant's, and its pale gold tint, without much colour or gloss, always reminded me of baby hair. I have heard people find fault with it. But when it was unbound and streaming in wavy masses over her shoulders it was singularly beautiful. She used to laugh sometimes at my admiration of her straw-coloured tresses, or lint-white locks, as she called them. But indeed there was no tint that quite described the colour of Gladys's hair.

'Oh, I was walking in some fool's paradise or other. There were roses in it like these. Well, another blue day is dawning, Ursula, and has to be lived through somehow. Will you help me to get up now?' But, though she tried after this to talk as usual, I could see the old restlessness was on her. A sort of feverish reaction had set in. She could settle to nothing, take

pleasure in nothing; and I was not surprised that Mr. Hamilton grumbled a little when he paid his morning visit.

'How is this? You are not quite so comfortable to-day, Gladys,' he asked, in a dissatisfied tone. 'Is your head aching again?'

She reluctantly pleaded guilty to the headache. Not that it was much, she assured him; but I interrupted her.

'The fact is, she sat up too late last night, and I let her talk too much and over-exert herself.' For I saw he was determined to come to the bottom of this.

'I think the nurse was to blame there,' he returned, darting a quick, uneasy look at me. I knew what he was thinking: Miss Darrell's speech, that Miss Garston always excited Gladys, must have come into his mind.

'If the nurse deserves blame she will take it meekly,' I replied. 'I know I was wrong to let her talk so much. I must enforce extra quiet to-day.' And then he said no more. I do not think he found it easy to give me the scolding that I deserved. And, after all, I had owned my fault.

I had just gone out in the passage an hour later, to carry away a bowl of carnations that Gladys found too strong in the room, when I heard Uncle Max's voice in the hall. The front door was open, and he had entered without ringing. I was glad of this. The door of the turret-room was closed, and Gladys would not hear his voice. I should manage to slip down without her noticing the fact.

So I busied myself in Lady Betty's room until I heard the drawing-room door open and close again, and I knew Miss Darrell was coming in search of me. I went out to meet her, with Gladys's empty luncheon-tray in my hands. I thought she looked rather cross and put out, as though her interview with Uncle Max had disappointed her.

'Mr. Cunliffe is in the drawing-room, and he would like to speak to you for a moment,' she said, in a voice that showed me how unwilling she was to bring me the message. 'I told him that you never cared to be disturbed in the morning, as you were so busy; but he was peremptory.'

'I am never too busy to see Uncle Max: he knows that,' I returned quickly. 'Will you kindly allow me a few moments alone with him?' for she was actually preparing to follow me, but after this request she retired sulkily into her own room.

I found Max standing in the middle of the room, looking

anxiously towards the door: the moment it closed behind me he put a thick white envelope in my hand.

'There it is, Ursula,' he said nervously: 'will you give it to her as soon as possible? I have been literally on thorns the last quarter of an hour. Miss Darrell would not take any of my hints that I wished to see you: so I was obliged at last to say that I could not wait another moment, and that I must ask her to fetch you at once.'

'Poor Max! I can imagine your feelings; but I have it safe here,' tapping my apron pocket. 'But you must not go just yet.' And I beckoned him across the room to the window that overlooked a stiff prickly shrub.

He looked at me in some surprise. 'We are alone, Ursula.'

'Yes, I know: but the walls have ears in this house: one is never safe near the conservatory: there are too many doors. Tell me, Max, how have you got on with Miss Darrell this morning?'

'I was praying hard for patience all the time,' he replied, half laughing. 'It was maddening to see her sitting there so cool and crisp in her yellow tea-gown—well, what garment was it?' as I uttered a dissenting ejaculation: 'something flimsy and æsthetic. I thought her smooth sentences would never stop.'

'Did she notice any change in your manner to her?'

'I am afraid so, for I saw her look at me quite uneasily more than once. I could not conceal that I was terribly bored. I have no wish to be discourteous to a lady, especially to one of my own church workers; but after what has passed I find it very difficult to forgive her.'

This was strong language on Max's part. I could see that as a woman he could hardly tolerate her, but he could not bring himself to condemn her even to me. He hardly knew yet what he had to forgive: neither he nor Gladys had any real idea of the treachery that had separated them.

Max would not stay many minutes, he was so afraid of Miss Darrell coming into the room again. I did rather an imprudent thing after that. Max was going to the Maberleys', for the colonel was seriously ill, so I begged him to go the garden way, and I kept him for a moment under the window of the turret-room.

I saw him glance up eagerly, almost hungrily, but the blinds were partially down, and there was only a white curtain flapping in the summer breeze.

But an unerring instinct told me that the sound of Max's voice would be a strong cordial to the invalid, it was so long since she had heard or seen him. As we sauntered under the oak-trees I knew Gladys would be watching us.

On my return to the room I found her sitting bolt upright in her arm-chair, grasping the arms; there were two spots of colour on her cheeks; she looked nervous and excited.

'I saw you walking with him, Ursula; he looked up, but I am glad he could not see me. Did—did he send me any message?' in a faltering voice.

'Yes, he sent you this.' And I placed the thick packet on her lap. 'Miss Hamilton,'—yes, it was her own name: he had written it. I saw her look at it, first incredulously, then with dawning hope in her eyes; but before her trembling hands could break the old-fashioned seal with which he had sealed it I had noiselessly left the room.

CHAPTER XLII

DOWN THE PEMBERLEY ROAD

THREE-QUARTERS of an hour had elapsed before I ventured into the room again; but at the first sound of my footsteps Gladys looked up, and called to me in a voice changed and broken with happiness.

'Ursula, dear Ursula, come here.' And as I knelt down beside her and put my arms round her she laid her cheek against my shoulder: it was wet with tears.

'Ursula, I am so happy. Do you know that he loves me, that he has loved me all through these years? You must not see what he says; it is only for my eyes; it is too sweet and sacred to be repeated; but I never dreamt that any one could care for me like that.'

I kissed her without speaking; there seemed a lump in my throat just then. I did not often repine, but the yearning sense of pain was strong on me. When would this cruel silence between me and Giles be broken? But Gladys, wrapt in her own blissful thoughts, did not notice my emotion.

'He says that there is much that he can only tell me by word of mouth, and that he dare not trust to a letter explanations for his silence, and much that I shall have to tell him in return; for we shall need each other's help in making everything clear.

'He seems to reproach himself bitterly, and asks my pardon over and over again for misunderstanding me so. He says my giving up my work was the first blow to his hopes, and then he had been told that I cared for my cousin Claude. He believed until this morning that I was in love with him; and it was your going to him—oh, my darling! how good you have been to me

and him!—that gave him courage to write this letter, Ursula.' And here she cried a little. 'Was it Etta who told him this falsehood about Claude? How could she be so wicked and cruel?'

'Do not think about her to-day, my dearest,' I returned soothingly. 'Her punishment will be great some day. We will not sit in judgment on her just now. She cannot touch your happiness again, thank heaven!'

'No,' with a sigh; 'but, as Max says, it is difficult to forgive the person who is the chief source of all our trouble. He did say that, and then he reproached himself again for uncharitableness, and added that he ought to have known me better.

'He does not seem quite certain yet that I can care for him, and he begs for just one word to put him out of his suspense, to tell him if I can ever love him well enough to be his wife. I don't want him to wait long for my answer, Ursula: he has suffered too much already. I think I could write a few words that would satisfy him, if I could only trust Chatty to take them.'

'You had better wait until to-morrow morning and intrust your letter to the "five-o'clock carrier."' And as my meaning dawned on her her doubtful expression changed into a smile. 'Do wait, Gladys,' I continued coaxingly. 'It is very selfish of me, perhaps, but I should like to give that letter to Max.'

'You may have your wish, then, for I was half afraid of sending it by Chatty. I have grown so nervous, Ursula, that I start at a shadow. I can trust you better than myself. Well, I will write it, and then it will be safe in your hands.'

I went away again after this, and left her alone in the quiet shady room. I fought rather a battle with myself as I paced up and down Lady Betty's spacious chamber. Why need I think of my own troubles? why could I not keep down this pain? I would think only of Gladys's and of my dear Max's happiness, and I dashed away hot tears that would keep blinding me as I remembered the chilly greeting of the morning. And yet once —but no; I would not recall that bitter-sweet memory. I left Gladys alone for an hour: when I went back she was leaning wearily against the cushions of her chair, the closely-written sheets still open on her lap, as though she needed the evidence of sight and touch to remind her that it was not part of her dream.

'Have you written your letter, Gladys?'

'Yes,' with a blush; 'but it is very short, only a few words.

He will understand that I am weak and cannot exert myself much. Will you read it, Ursula, and tell me if it will do?'

I thought it better to set her mind at rest, so I took it without demur. The pretty, clear handwriting was rather tremulous: he would be sorry to see that.

'My dear Mr. Cunliffe,'—it said,—'Your letter has made me very happy. I wish I could answer it as it ought to be answered; but I know you will not misunderstand the reason why I say so little.

'I have been very ill, and am still very weak, and my hand trembles too much when I try to write; but I am not ungrateful for all the kind things you say; it makes me very happy to know you feel like that, even though I do not deserve it.

'You must not blame yourself so much for misunderstanding me: we have both been deceived; I know that now. It was wrong of me to give up my work; but Etta told me that people were saying unkind things of me, and I was a coward and listened to her: so you see I was to blame too.

'I have not answered your question yet, but I think I will do so by signing myself,

'Yours, always and for ever,

'GLADYS.'

'Will he understand that, Ursula?'

'Surely, dear; the end is plain enough: you belong to Max now.'

'I like to know that,' she returned simply. 'Oh, the rest of feeling that he will take care of me now! it is too good to talk about. But I hope I am sufficiently thankful.' And Gladys's lovely eyes were full of solemn feeling as she spoke.

I thought she wanted to be quiet,—it was difficult for her to realise her happiness at once,—so I told her that I had some letters to write, and carried my desk into the next room, but she followed me after a time, and we had a long talk about Max.

When Mr. Hamilton came up in the evening he noticed the improvement in Gladys's appearance.

'You are better to-night, my dear.'

'Oh yes, so much better,' looking up in his face with a smile. 'Giles, do you think it would hurt me to have a drive to-morrow? I am so tired of these two rooms. A drive alone with Ursula would be delicious. We could go down the Redstone lanes towards Pemberley: one always has a whiff of sea-air there over the downs.'

Gladys's request surprised me quite as much as it did Mr. Hamilton. She had proposed it in all innocence; no idea of encountering Max entered her head for a moment; Gladys's simplicity would be incapable of laying plans of this sort. Her new-born happiness made her anxious to lay aside her invalid habits; she wanted to be strong, to resume daily life, to breathe the fresh outer air.

As for Mr. Hamilton, he did not try to conceal his pleasure.

'I see we shall soon lose our patient, nurse,' he said, with one of his old droll looks. 'She is anxious to make herself independent of us.—Oh, you shall go, by all means. I will go round to the stable and tell Atkinson myself. It is an excellent idea, Gladys.'

'I am so glad you do not object. I am so much stronger this evening, and I have wanted to go out for days; but, Giles,' —touching his arm gently,—'you will make Etta understand that I want to go alone with Ursula.'

'Certainly, my dear.' He would not cross her whim; she might have her way if she liked; but the slight frown on his face showed that he was not pleased at this allusion to Miss Darrell. He thought Gladys was almost morbidly prejudiced against her cousin; but he prudently refrained from telling her so, and Gladys went to bed happy.

I had taken the precaution of asking Chatty to wake me the next morning. I had slept little the previous night, and was afraid that I might oversleep myself in consequence. It was rather a trial when her touch roused me out of a delicious dream; but one glance at Gladys's pale face made me ashamed of my indolence. I dressed myself as quickly as I could, and then looked at my little clock. Chatty had been better than her word: it had not struck five yet.

Max would not be out for another hour, I thought, but all the same I might as well take advantage of the morning freshness: so I summoned Chatty to let me out as noiselessly as possible, and then I stole through the shrubberies, breaking a silver-spangled cobweb or two and feeling the wet beads of dew on my face.

I walked slowly down the road, drinking deep draughts of the pure morning air. I had some thoughts of sitting down in the churchyard until I saw some sign of life in the vicarage; but as I turned the corner I heard a gate swing back on its hinges, and there was Max standing bareheaded in the road, as though

he had come out to reconnoitre; but directly he caught sight of me two or three strides seemed to bring him to my side.

'Have you brought it?' he asked breathlessly.

'Yes, Max.' And I put the letter in his outstretched hand; and then, without looking at him, I turned quietly and retraced my steps. I would not wait with him while he read it; he should be alone, with only the sunshine round him and the birds singing their joyous melodies in his ear. No doubt he would join his *Te Deum* with theirs. Happy Max, who had won his Lady of Delight!

But I had not quite crossed the green when I heard his footsteps behind me, and turned to meet him.

'Ursula, you naughty child! why have you run away without waiting to congratulate me? And yet I'll be bound you knew the contents of this letter.'

'Yes, Max, and from my heart I wish you and Gladys every happiness.'

'Good little Ursula! Oh yes, we shall be happy.' And the satisfaction in Max's brown eyes was pleasant to see. 'She will need all the care and tenderness that I can give her. We must make her forget all these sad years. Do you think that she will be content at the old vicarage, Ursula?' But as he asked the question there was no doubt—no doubt at all—on his face.

'I think she will be content anywhere with you, Max. Gladys loves you dearly.'

'Ah,' he said humbly, 'I know it now, I am sure of it; but I wish I deserved my blessing. All these years I have known her goodness. She used to show me all that was in her heart with the simplicity of a child. Such sweet frankness! such noble unselfishness! was it a wonder that I loved her? If I were only more worthy to be her husband!'

I liked Max to say this: there was nothing unmanly or strained in this humility. The man who loves can never think himself worthy of the woman he worships: his very affection casts a glamour over her. When I told Max that I thought his wife would be a happy woman, he only smiled and said that he hoped so too. He had not the faintest idea what a hero he was in our eyes; he would not have believed me if I had told him.

Max said very little to me after that: happiness made him reticent. Only, just as he was leaving me, I said carelessly, 'Max, do you ever go to Pemberley?'

'Oh yes, sometimes, when the Calverleys are at the Hall,' he returned, rather absently.

'Pemberley is a very pretty place,' I went on, stopping to pick a little piece of sweet-brier that attracted me by its sweetness: 'it is very pleasant to walk there through the Redstone lanes. There is a fine view over the down, and at four o'clock, for example——'

'What about four o'clock?' he demanded: and now there was a little excitement in his manner.

'Well, if you should by chance be in one of the Redstone lanes about then, you might possibly see an open barouche with two ladies in it.'

'Ursula, you are a darling!' And Max seized my wrists so vigorously that he hurt me. 'Four—did you say four o'clock?'

'It was very wrong of me to say anything about it. Gladys would be shocked at my making an appointment. I believe you are demoralising me, Max; but I do not mean to tell her.' And then, after a few more eager questions on Max's part, he reluctantly let me go.

I had plenty to tell Gladys when she woke that morning, but I prudently kept part of our conversation to myself. She wanted to know how Max looked when he got her letter. Did he seem happy? had he sent her any message? And when I had satisfied her on these points she had a hundred other questions to ask. 'I am engaged to him, and yet we cannot speak to each other,' she finished, a little mournfully.

I turned her thoughts at last by speaking about the promised drive. We decided she should put on her pretty gray dress and bonnet to do honour to the day. 'It is a fête-day, Gladys,' I said cheerfully, 'and we must be as gay as possible.' And she agreed to this.

At the appointed time we heard the horses coming round from the stables, and Mr. Hamilton came upstairs himself to fetch his sister. Chatty had told me privately that Miss Darrell had been very cross all day. She had wanted the carriage for herself that afternoon, and had spoken quite angrily to Mr. Hamilton about it; but he had told her rather coldly that she must give up her wishes for once. Thornton heard master say that he was surprised at her selfishness: he had thought she would be glad that Miss Gladys should have a drive. 'Miss Darrell looked as black as possible, Thornton said, ma'am,'

continued Chatty; 'but she did not dare argue with master; he always has the best of it with her.'

As we drove off, I saw Miss Darrell watching us from the study window: evidently her bad temper had not evaporated, for she had not taken the trouble to come out in the hall to speak to Gladys, and yet they had not met for a month. Gladys did not see her: she was smiling at her brother, who was waving a good-bye from the open door. My heart smote me a little as I looked at him. Would he think me very deceitful, I wondered, for giving Max that clue? but after a moment I abandoned these thoughts and gave myself up to the afternoon's enjoyment.

The air was delicious, the summer heat tempered by cool breezes that seemed to come straight from the sea. Gladys lay back luxuriously among the cushions, watching the flicker of green leaves over our heads, or the soft shadows that lurked in the distant meadows, or admiring the picturesque groups of cattle under some wide-spreading tree.

We had nearly reached Pemberley, the white roofs of the cottages were gleaming through a belt of firs, when I at last caught sight of Max. He was half hidden by some blackberry-bushes. I think he was sitting on a stile resting himself; but when he heard the carriage-wheels he came slowly towards us and put up his hand as a sign that Atkinson should pull up.

I shall never forget the sudden illumination that lit up Gladys's face when she saw him: a lovely colour tinged her cheeks as their eyes met, and she put out her little gray-gloved hand to touch his. I opened the carriage door and slipped down into the road.

'The horses can stand in the shade a little while, Atkinson,' I said carelessly: 'I want to get some of those poppies, if the stile be not very high.' I knew he would be watching me and looking after Whitefoot, who was often a little fidgety, and would take the vicar's appearance on the Pemberley road as a matter of course.

I was a long time gathering those poppies. Once I peeped through the hedge. I could see two heads very close together. Max's arms were on the carriage; the little gray-gloved hands were not to be seen; the sunshine was shining on Gladys's fair hair and Max's beard. Were they speaking at all? Could Atkinson have heard one of those low tones? And then I went on with my poppies.

It was more than a quarter of an hour when I climbed over the stile again, laden with scarlet poppies and pale-coloured convolvuli. Gladys saw me first. 'Here is Ursula,' I heard her say; and Max moved away reluctantly.

'I do not see why we should not drive you back to Heathfield, Max,' I remarked coolly; and, as neither of them had any objection to raise, we soon made room for Max.

There was very little said by any of us during the drive home; only Gladys pressed my hand in token of gratitude; her eyes were shining with happiness. As Max looked at the pale, sweet face opposite to him his heart must have swelled with pride and joy: nothing could come between those two now; henceforth they would belong to each other for time and eternity.

Max asked us to put him down at the Three Firs; he had to call at 'The Gowans,' he said. 'In two or three days—I cannot wait longer,' he said, in a meaning tone, as he bade good-bye to Gladys. She blushed and smiled in answer.

'What does Max mean?' I asked, as we left him behind us in the road.

'It is only that he wishes to speak to Giles,' she returned shyly. 'I asked him to wait a day or two until I felt better; but he does not wish to delay it; he says Giles has always wanted it so, but that he has long lost hope about it.'

'I don't see why Max need have waited an hour,' was my reply; but there was no time for Gladys to answer me, for we were turning in at the gate, and there were Mr. Hamilton and Miss Darrell walking up and down the lawn watching for us.

Mr. Hamilton came towards us at once, and gave his hand to Gladys.

'I need not ask how you have enjoyed your drive,' he said, looking at her bright face with evident satisfaction.

'Oh, it has been lovely!' she returned, with such unwonted animation that Miss Darrell stared at her. 'How do you do, Etta? It is long since we have met.—Giles, if you will give me your arm, I think I will go upstairs at once, for I am certainly a little tired.—Come, Ursula.'

'We met Mr. Cunliffe in the Pemberley Road, and drove him back,' I observed carelessly, when Miss Darrell was out of hearing. I thought it better to allude to Max in case Atkinson mentioned it to one of the servants.

'You should have brought him in to dinner,' was Mr. Hamilton's only comment. 'By the bye, Miss Garston, when

do you intend to honour us with your company downstairs? Your patient is convalescent now.'

'I have just awoke to that fact,' was my reply, 'and I have told Mrs. Barton that she will soon see me back at the White Cottage. Miss Watson leaves next Tuesday: I think Gladys could spare me by then.'

Gladys shook her head. 'I shall never willingly spare you, Ursula; but of course I shall have no right to trespass on your time.'

'No, of course not,' returned her brother sharply; 'Miss Garston has been too good to us already: we cannot expect her to sacrifice herself any longer. We will say Tuesday, then. You will come downstairs on Sunday, Gladys?'

'Yes,' with a faint sigh.

'We need not talk about my going yet, when Gladys is tired,' I returned, feeling inclined to scold Mr. Hamilton for his want of tact. Tuesday, and it was Wednesday now,—not quite a week more; but, looking up, I saw Mr. Hamilton regarding me so strangely, and yet so sorrowfully, that my brief irritability vanished. He was sorry that I was going; he seemed about to speak; his lips unclosed, then a sudden frown of recollection crossed his brow, and with a curt good-night he left us.

'What is the matter with Giles?' asked Gladys, rather wearily: I could see she was very tired by this time. 'Have you and he quarrelled, Ursula?'

'Not to my knowledge,' I replied quietly, turning away, that she should not see my burning cheeks. 'There is Chatty bringing the tea: are you not glad, dear?' And I busied myself in clearing the table.

CHAPTER XLIII

'CONSPIRACY CORNER'

GLADYS went to bed very early that night: her long drive had disposed her for sleep. The summer twilight was only creeping over the western sky when I closed her door and went out into the passage: the evening was only half over, and a fit of restlessness induced me to seek the garden.

The moon was just rising behind the little avenue, and the soft rush of summer air that met me as I stepped through the open door had the breath of a thousand flowers on it. Mr. Hamilton was shut safely in his study; I was aware of that fact, as I had heard him tell Gladys that night that he had a medical article to write that he was anxious to finish. Miss Darrell would be reading novels in the drawing-room; there was no fear of meeting any one; but some instinct—for we have no word in our human language to express the divine impetus that sways our inward promptings—induced me to take refuge in the dark asphalt path that skirted the meadow and led to Atkinson's cottage and the kitchen-garden.

I was unhappy,—in a mood that savoured of misanthropy; my fate was growing cross-grained, enigmatical. Mr. Hamilton's frown had struck cold to my heart; I was beginning to lose patience (to lose hope was impossible),—to ask myself why he remained silent.

'If he has anything against me,—and his manner tells me that he has,—why does he not treat me with frankness?' I thought. 'He calls himself my friend, and yet he reposes no trust in me. He breaks my heart with his changed looks and coldness, and yet he gives me no reason for his injustice. I

would not treat my enemy so, and yet all the time I feel he loves me.' And as I paced under the dark hanging shrubs I felt there was nothing morbid or untrue in those lines, that 'to be wroth with one that we love does work like madness on the brain,' and that I was growing angry with Mr. Hamilton.

I had just reached a dark angle where the path dips a little, when I was startled by hearing voices close to me. There was a seat screened by some laurel-bushes that went by the name of 'Conspiracy Corner,' dating back from the time when Gladys and Eric were children and had once hidden some fireworks among the bushes. It was there that Claude Hamilton had proposed to Lady Betty, when Gladys had found them, and the two young creatures had appealed to her to help them. The seat was so hidden and secluded by shrubs that you could pass without seeing its occupants, unless a little bit of fluttering drapery or the gleam of some gold chain or locket caught one's eye. I remembered once being very much startled when Lady Betty popped out suddenly on me as I passed.

I was just retracing my steps, with a sense of annoyance at finding my privacy invaded, when a sentence in Leah's voice attracted my attention:

'I tell you he was driving with them this afternoon: I heard Miss Garston tell the master so. It is no good you fretting and worrying yourself, Miss Etta, to prevent those two coming together. I've always warned you that the vicar cares more for her little finger than he does for all your fine airs and graces.'

I stood as though rooted to the spot, incapable of moving a step.

'You are a cruel, false woman!' returned another voice, which I recognised as Miss Darrell's, though it was broken with angry sobs. 'You say that to vex me and make me wretched because you are in a bad temper. You are an ungrateful creature, Leah, after all my kindness; and it was you yourself who told me that he was getting tired of Gladys's whims and vagaries.'

'I can't remember what I told you,' replied the woman sullenly. 'There are no fools like old ones, they say, and you need not believe everything as though it is gospel truth. There is not a man in the world worth all this worry. Why don't you give it up, Miss Etta? Do you think Mr. Cunliffe will ever give you a thought? I would be too proud, if I were

a lady, to fling myself under a man's feet. Do you think he would like your crooked ways about Mr. Eric?'

'Hush, Leah! for pity's sake, hush! What makes you so cruel to me to-night?'

'Well now, look here, Miss Etta; I am not going to be hushed up when I choose to speak; and who is to hear us, I should like to know? only it is your guilty conscience that is always starting at shadows. I mean to speak to you pretty plainly, for I am getting sick of the whole business. You are playing fast and loose with me about that money. Are you going to give it me or not?'

I drew a step nearer. Leah had mentioned Eric's name. Was it not my duty,—my bounden duty,—for Gladys's sake, for all their sakes, to hear what this woman had to say? Would it be dishonourable to listen when so much was at stake? Already I had been startled by a revelation that turned me cold with horror. Miss Darrell was Gladys's rival,—her deadly, secret rival,—and not one of us, not even Max, guessed at this unhealthy and morbid passion. That such a woman should love my pure-minded, honourable Max! I recoiled at the mere idea.

'You are so impatient, Leah,' returned the other reproachfully. 'You know it is not easy for me to get the money. Giles was complaining the other day that so much was spent in the housekeeping; he never thought me extravagant before, but he seemed to say that my personal expenses were rather lavish. "You have twice as many gowns as Gladys," he said: "and, though I do not grudge you things, I think you ought to keep within your allowance."'

'I can't help all that, Miss Etta,' and I could tell by the voice that the woman meant to be insolent. 'A promise is a promise, and must be kept, and poor Bob must not suffer from your procrastinating ways. You are far too slippery and shifty, Miss Etta; but I tell you that money I must and will have before this week is over, if I have to go to master myself about it.'

'You had better go to him, then,' with rising temper. 'I don't quite know what Giles will say about retaining you in his service when he knows you have a brother at Millbank. A servant with a convict-brother is not considered generally desirable in a house.' But Leah broke in upon this sneering speech in sudden fury: even in my disgust at this scene I could

not but marvel at Miss Darrell's recklessness in rousing the evil spirit in this woman.

'You to talk of my poor Bob being in Millbank, who ought to be there yourself!' she cried, in a voice hoarse and low with passion. 'Are you out of your senses, Miss Etta, to taunt me with poor Bob's troubles? What is to prevent me from going to master now and saying to him——'

'Oh, hush, Leah! please forgive me; but you made me so angry.'

'From saying to him,' persisted Leah remorselessly, '"You are all of you wrong about Mr. Eric. You have hunted the poor boy out of the house, and driven him crazy among you; and if he has drowned himself, as folk believe, his death lies at Miss Etta's door. It was she who stole the cheque. I saw her take it with my own eyes, only she begged me on her knees not to betray her; and just then Mr. Eric came in with his letter, and the devil entered into me to cast the suspicion on him."'

'Leah,' in a voice of deadly terror, 'for God's sake be silent! if any one should hear us! There was a crackling just now in the bushes. Leah, you were good to my mother: how can you be so cruel to me?'

'It is no use your whining to me, Miss Etta,' returned the same hard, dogged voice; 'Bob must have that money. When I promised to keep your disgraceful secret,—when I stood by and helped you ruin that poor boy, and Bob cashed your cheque,—I named my price. I wanted to keep Bob out of mischief, but his bad companions were too much for him. Now are you going to get that money for me or not?'

'I dare not ask Giles for more,' replied Miss Darrell, and I could hear she was crying. 'I gave you half the housekeeping money last week and the week before. If Giles looks at my accounts I am undone.'

'And there was that cheque that you were to send Miss Gladys when she was at Bournemouth, and for which she sent that pretty message of thanks,' interposed Leah, with a sneer. 'Shall I tell master where that has gone, Miss Etta? And you to speak of my poor Bob because he is at Millbank!'

'Leah, you are killing me,' renewed Miss Darrell. 'I might as well die as go on living like this. You are always threatening to turn against me, and I give you money whenever you ask me. You shall have my gold bracelet with the emerald

star. It was my mother's and it will fetch a good deal. I cannot get more from Giles now. He is not like himself just now, and I dare not make him angry.'

'Oh, you have tried your hand there, Miss Etta. No, I am not asking you, so you need not tell me any lies. I knew all about it when you sent me up to Hyde Park Gate to spy on my young lady. I have worked willingly for you there. I've hated Miss Garston ever since I set eyes on her. She is a sharp one, I tell you that, Miss Etta. She means to bring these two together, and she will do it in spite of you.'

'I wish I were dead!' moaned Miss Darrell.

But I did not dare to linger another moment. My heart was beating so loudly that I feared it would betray me. The faint stir of the bushes turned me sick, for I thought they might be moving from their seat. Not for worlds would I have confronted them alone in that dark asphalt walk. My fears were absurd, but I felt as though Leah were capable of strangling me. Granted that this terror was unreasonable and childish, I knew I could not breathe freely until I was within reach of Mr. Hamilton. As I crept down the path the sensation of a nightmare haunted me. I felt as though my feet were weighted with lead. My face was cold and damp, and I drew my breath painfully. I almost felt as though I must hide myself in the shrubbery until the faintness passed off; but I shook off my weakness as I remembered that I might be shut out of the house if I allowed them to go in first. As I emerged from the dark overhanging trees I grew calmer and walked on more quickly. I dared not cross the open lawn, for fear I might be seen, but took the most secluded route through the oak avenue. If they should perceive me walking down the terrace towards the conservatory they would only think that I had just left the house. I could see no signs of them, however, and gained the open door safely.

Even in my state of terror I had made my plan, and without giving myself a moment to recover my self-possession I knocked at the study door, and, at Mr. Hamilton's rather impatient 'Come in,' entered it with the same sort of feeling that one would enter an ark of refuge.

He laid down his pen in some surprise when he saw me, and then rose quickly from his seat.

'You are ill; you have come to tell me so,' in an anxious voice. 'Don't try to speak this moment: sit down—my—Miss

Garston'; but I caught his arm nervously as he seemed about to leave me.

'Don't go away: I must speak to you. I am not ill: only I have had a turn. You may give me some water'; for there was a bottle and glass on the table. He obeyed me at once, and watched me as I tried to take it; but my hand trembled too much: the next moment he had put it to my lips, and had wiped the moisture gently from my forehead.

'It is only faintness; it will pass off directly,' he said quietly. 'I will not leave you; but I have some sal volatile in that cupboard, and I think you will be the better for it.' And he mixed me some, and stood by me without speaking until the colour came back to my face. 'You are better now, Ursula—I mean,' biting his lips—'well, never mind. Do you feel a little less shaky?'

'Yes, thank you. I did not mean to be so foolish, but it was dark, and I got frightened and nervous; and oh, Mr. Hamilton, I must not lose time, or they will be coming in.'

'Who will be coming in?' he asked, rather bewildered at this. 'There is no one out, is there?'

'Yes, Miss Darrell and Leah. I heard them talking in "Conspiracy Corner"; you know that seat in the asphalt walk?'

'Well?' regarding me with an astonished air.

'Mr. Hamilton, I am better now. I am not frightened any longer now I am with you. Will you please call Leah when she comes in from the garden? I want to speak to her in your presence. I have a most serious charge to make against her and against your cousin Miss Darrell. It relates,' and here I felt my lips getting white again,—'it relates to your brother Eric.'

He started, and an expression of pain crossed his face,—a sudden look of fear, as though he dreaded what I might have to tell him; but the next moment he was thinking only of me.

'You shall speak to Leah to-morrow,' he said gently; 'it is late now,—nearly ten o'clock,—and you are ill, and had better go to bed and rest yourself. I can wait until to-morrow,' taking my cold hand.

But I would not be silenced. I implored him earnestly to do this for me,—to summon Leah into the study, but not to let Miss Darrell know.

'I suppose you think you could not sleep until you had

relieved your mind,' he said, looking at me attentively. 'Well, they are coming in now. Leah is fastening the door. Finish that sal volatile while I fetch her.'

I took it at a draught. But Mr. Hamilton's kindness had been my best restorative: I was no longer faint or miserable: he had cheered and comforted me.

I heard Leah's voice approaching the study door with perfect calmness.

'Miss Etta has gone up to bed, sir,' I heard her say; 'she has a headache: that is what makes her eyes so weak.'

'I should have said myself that she was crying,' returned Mr. Hamilton drily. 'Come in here a moment, Leah; I want to speak to you.'

She did not see me until the door was closed behind her, and then I saw her glance at me uneasily. Mr. Hamilton had evidently not prepared her for my presence in the study.

'Did you or Miss Garston wish to speak to me, sir?' she asked, with a veiled insolence of manner that she had shown to me lately; but I could see that no suspicion of the truth had dawned on her.

'It is I who wish to speak to you, Leah,' I returned severely; 'and I have asked your master to send for you that I might speak in his presence. Mr. Hamilton, I am going to repeat the conversation that I have just overheard between Leah and her mistress when they were in the seat in the asphalt walk: you shall hear it from my lips word for word.'

I never saw a countenance change as Leah's did that moment: her ordinary sallow complexion became a sort of dead-white; from insolence, her manner grew cringing, almost abject; the shock deprived her of all power of speech; only directly I began she caught hold of my gown with both hands, as though to implore me to stop; but Mr. Hamilton shook off her touch angrily, and asked her if it looked as though she were an honest woman to be so afraid of her own words. And then the sullen look came back to her face and never left it again.

I repeated every word. I do not believe I omitted a sentence, except that part that referred to Uncle Max. I could see Leah shrink and collapse as I mentioned her convict-brother, and such a gleam of fierce concentrated hatred shot from beneath her drooping lids that Mr. Hamilton instinctively moved to my side; but a low groan escaped him when I repeated Leah's words about the cheque. 'Good heavens! do you mean that

Eric never took it?' he exclaimed, in a horror-stricken tone; but the woman merely raised her eyes and looked at him, and he was silent again until I had finished.

There was a moment's ominous silence after that: perhaps Mr. Hamilton was praying for self-control; he had grown frightfully pale, and yet he was a man who rarely changed colour: the veins on his forehead were swollen, and when he spoke his voice was hoarse with repressed passion.

'What have you to say for yourself, Leah? Do you know I could indict you for conspiracy and conniving at theft?'

'I know that very well,' returned the woman, trying to brave it out; but she could not meet his indignant look. 'But it is your own flesh and blood that is in fault here. Miss Etta is more to blame than I.'

Mr. Hamilton crossed the room and locked the door, putting the key coolly in his pocket; then he made me sit down,—for I had been standing all this time,—and, as though to enforce obedience, he kept his hand on my arm. I could see Leah looking about her as though she were caught in a trap: her light-coloured eyes had a scintillating look of fear in them.

'Now, Leah,' observed her master, in a terrible voice, 'if you are to expect any mercy at my hand you will make a clean breast; but first you will answer my question: Has Miss Garston repeated the conversation between you and Miss Etta correctly?'

'Yes, I believe so,' very sullenly.

'You saw Miss Etta take the cheque with your own eyes the night before Mr. Eric left home?'

'Yes.' Then, as though these questions tortured her, she said doggedly—

'Look here, sir; I am caught in a trap, and there is no getting out of it. I have lost my place and my character, thanks to Miss Garston,'—another vindictive look at me. 'If you will promise like a gentleman not to take advantage of my evidence, I will tell you all about it.'

'I will make no promises,' he returned, in the same stern voice; 'but if you do not speak I will send for the police at once, and have you up before a magistrate. You have connived at theft: that will be sufficient to criminate you.'

'I know all about that,' was the unflinching answer; 'and I know for the old mistress's sake you will be glad to hush it all up: it would not be pleasant to bring your own cousin before a magistrate, especially after promising the old mistress

on her death-bed to be as good to Miss Etta as though she were your own sister.'

I saw the shadow of some sorrowful recollection cross his face as she said this. I had heard from Max how dearly he had loved his aunt Margaret: though her daughter had wrought such evil in his life, he would still seek to shield her. Leah knew this too, and took advantage of her knowledge in her crafty manner.

'It would be best to tell you all, for Mr. Eric's sake. I know Miss Etta will be safe with you. She has done a deal of mischief since she has been under your roof. Somehow crooked ways come natural to her: the old mistress knew that, for she once said to me towards the last, "Leah, I am afraid my poor child has got some twist or warp in her nature; but I hope my nephew will never find out her want of straightforwardness." And she begged me, with tears in her eyes, to watch over her and try to influence her, although I was only a servant; and for a little while I tried, only the devil tempted me, for the sake of poor Bob.'

'Bob is the name of your brother who is at Millbank?' asked Mr. Hamilton, in the same hard voice.

'Yes, sir; he got into a bit of trouble through mixing with bad companions. But there,'—with a sudden fierce light in her eyes that reminded me of a tigress protecting her young,—'I am not going to talk of Bob: lads will get into trouble sometimes. If Mr. Eric had not been so interfering at that time, ordering Bob off the premises whenever he caught sight of him, and calling him a good-for-nothing loafer and all sorts of hard names,—why, he gave Bob a black eye one day when he was doing nothing but shying stones at the birds in the kitchen-garden,—if it had not been for Mr. Eric's treatment of Bob I might have acted better by him.'

'Will you keep to the subject, Leah?' observed her master, in a warning voice. 'I wish to hear how that cheque was taken from my study that night.'

'Well, sir, if you must know,' returned Leah reluctantly, 'Miss Etta was in a bit of a worry about money just then: she had got the accounts wrong somehow, and there was a heavy butcher's bill to be paid. She had let it run on too long, and all the time you believed it was settled every week: it was partly your fault, because you so seldom looked at the accounts, and was always trusting her with large sums of money. Miss Etta

did not mean to be dishonest, but she was extravagant, and sometimes her dressmaker refused to wait for the money, and sometimes her milliner threatened to dun her; but she would quiet them a bit with a five- or ten-pound note filched from the housekeeping, always meaning, as she said, to pay it back when she drew her quarterly allowance.

'I used to know of these doings of hers, for often and often she has sent me to pacify them with promises. I told her sometimes that she would do it once too often, but she always said it was for the last time.

'She got afraid to tell me at last, but I knew all about the butcher's bill, for Mr. Dryden had been up to the house asking to see you, as he wanted his account settled. You were out when he called, but I never saw Miss Etta in such a fright: she had a fit of hysterics in her own room after he had left the house, and I had trouble enough to pacify her. She said if you found out that Dryden's account had not been settled for three months that you would never trust her again; that she was afraid Mr. Eric suspected her, and that she did not feel safe with him, and a great deal more that I cannot remember.

'It ended with her making up her mind to pawn most of her jewellery, and we arranged that Bob should manage the business. He was up at the cottage for a night or two, though no one was aware of that fact, for he kept close, for fear Mr. Eric should spy upon him.

'He slept at the cottage the very night the cheque was stolen from the study'; but as Leah paused here Mr. Hamilton lifted his head from his hands and bade her impatiently go on with the history of that night.

CHAPTER XLIV

LEAH'S CONFESSION

'You know what happened that day, sir,' observed Leah, hesitating a moment, for even her hard nature felt some compunction at the look of suffering on her master's face. She had eaten his bread for years, and had deceived and duped him; but she must have felt remorse stirring in her as she saw him drop his head on his clasped hands again, as though he were compelling himself to listen without interruption.

'You had been talking to Mr. Eric a long time in the study, Miss Etta told me; he had been going on like mad about Mr. Edgar Brown, and having to go to Mr. Armstrong's office; but you had been very firm, and had refused to hear any more, and he had flung off to his own room in one of his passions. Miss Gladys had followed him, and I heard him telling her that he had forgotten himself and struck you, and that you had turned him out of the study, and that he was in difficulties and must have money, for Mr. Edgar had got him into some trouble.'

'You heard this by listening at Mr. Eric's door, for Miss Gladys saw you,' I observed, not willing to let this pass.

'What has that got to do with it?' she returned rudely. 'I am speaking to the master, not you'; but she grew a shade paler as I spoke. 'You were up late that night, sir; I was waiting to speak to Miss Etta, and encountered you in the passage. I went back to my own room for a little while, and then I knocked at her door; but there was no answer. I could see the room was dark, but I could hardly believe she was asleep: so I went to the bed and called Miss Etta, but I very soon found she was not there: her gown was on the couch and her dressing-gown missing from its place.

'I had a notion that I might as well follow her, for somehow I guessed that she had gone to the study; but I was certainly not prepared to see Mr. Eric stooping over your desk. He had a letter in his hand, and had just put down his chamber candlestick. All at once it flashed upon my mind that Miss Etta had told me that you had received a large cheque that night, and that you were going up to London the next day to cash it, and she hoped Dryden would not call again before you went. She said it quite casually, and I am sure then she had not thought of helping herself. Then the thought must have come to her all of a sudden.

'I remembered the cheque, and for an instant I suspected Mr. Eric. But as I was watching him I saw the curtain of one of the windows move, and I had a glimpse of yellow embroidery that certainly belonged to Miss Etta's dressing-gown. In a moment I grasped the truth: she had taken the cheque to settle Dryden's bill. But I must make myself certain of the fact: so I asked Mr. Eric, rather roughly, what he was doing, and he retorted by bidding me mind my own business.

'He had laid his letter on the desk, but when he had gone I walked up straight to the window, and nearly frightened Miss Etta into a fit by asking her what she had done with the cheque. She was grovelling on her knees before me in a moment, calling me her dear Leah and imploring me to shield her. I was very fierce with her at first, and was for putting it back again, until she told me, trembling all over, that she had endorsed it. She had copied your writing, and only an expert could have told the difference.

'"It is too late, Leah," she kept saying; "we cannot hide it from Giles now, and I must have the money, and you must help me to get it." And then she whispered that I should have some of it for Bob.

'"It is a nasty bit of business, Miss Etta," I replied, for I did not want to spare her; "it is forgery, that is what they would call it in a court of law"; but she would not let me finish, but flung herself upon me with a suppressed scream, and I could not shake her off. She kept saying that she would destroy herself if I would not help her: so I turned it over in my mind. I wanted money for Bob, and—well, sir, the devil had a deal to do with that night's business. I had settled it all before an hour was over. Bob would go up to London with the cheque, and cash it at the bank: he was tall and fair, and a suit of Mr. Eric's

old clothes would make him quite the gentleman, and no one would notice the scar; when he was safely off and you missed the cheque there would be little trouble in casting the blame on Mr. Eric. I had taken care to place the letter in the desk, and I had plenty of circumstantial evidence to offer.

'Well, you know the rest, sir,—how you called Miss Etta into your study, and how she begged you to send for me. I had my story all ready,—my fear of thieves, and how I saw Mr. Eric standing with his hand in your desk. Of course the cheque could not be found: no one believed the poor young gentleman's ravings, especially after his talk with Miss Gladys. We took care that the telegram should not be sent too soon. Bob was on his way back by then, and before evening Dryden had his money, and Bob was safe in Clerkenwell. What is the good of my repeating it all? I shielded Miss Etta at Mr. Eric's expense; and, though I was sorry enough to drive him away from his home, we had to look to our own safety, and Miss Etta was nearly out of her mind with remorse and terror.' But here Mr. Hamilton's voice interrupted her harshly.

'Wait a moment, woman: have you ever since that day heard anything of that unfortunate boy?'

To my surprise Leah hesitated. 'Miss Etta believes that he is dead, sir; but I can't help differing from her, though I never told her the reason; but I have fancied more than once,—indeed I am speaking the truth now, sir,' as he darted a meaning look at her, 'I have no motive to do otherwise,—I have fancied that I have seen some one very like Mr. Eric lurking about the road on a dark night. Once I was nearly sure it was Mr. Eric, though he wore a workman's dress as a disguise. He was looking at the windows; the blind was up in the study, and Miss Gladys was there with Mr. Cunliffe; he had made her laugh about something. It was a warm night, and rather wet, and the window was open; I was just shutting it when I caught sight of him, and nearly called out; but he turned away quickly, and hid himself in the shrubbery, and though I went out to look for him I was too late, for I could see him walking down the road.'

'You are sure it was Mr. Eric.' Oh, the look of intense relief on Mr. Hamilton's face! He must have believed him dead all this time.

'I am nearly sure, sir. I saw him again in town. I was passing the Albert Memorial when I looked up at one of the

fine houses opposite, and saw a young workman on the balcony with a painter's brush in his hand: the sun was shining full on his face. I saw him plainly then.'

Mr. Hamilton started from his seat. 'If this be true!—my father's son gaining his bread as a house-painter!'

'It is true,' I whispered; 'for I saw him myself, and told Gladys.'

'You saw him!—you!' with an air of utter incredulity.

'Yes; and I tried to speak to him. He was so like the picture in Gladys's room, I thought it must be Eric. But he would not hear me, and in a moment he was gone. The men called him Jack Poynter, and said he was a gentleman, but no one knew where he lived. Oh, I have tried so hard to find him for you, but he will not be found.'

'And you did not tell me of this,' very reproachfully.

'Gladys would not let me tell you,' I returned: 'we could not be sure, and——' But he put up his hand to stop me.

'That will do,' in a tone of suppressed grief that went to my heart. 'I will not wrong you if I can help it; no doubt you did it for the best; you did not willingly deceive me.'

'Never! I have never deceived you, Mr. Hamilton.'

'Not intentionally. I will do you justice even now; but, oh,'—and here he clinched his right hand, and I saw the veins on it stand out like whip-cord,—'how I have been betrayed! Those I have trusted have brought trouble and confusion in my household; and, good God! they are women, and I cannot curse them.'

I saw Leah quail beneath this burst of most righteous indignation. The blinding tears rushed to my eyes as I heard him: in spite of his sternness, he had been so simple and so unsuspicious. He trusted people so fully, he was so generous in his confidence, and yet the woman he loved had played him false, and the pitiful creatures he had sheltered under his roof had hatched this conspiracy against his peace.

'You can leave me now,' he continued harshly, turning to Leah. 'I will not trust myself to say more to you. If you receive mercy and not justice at my hands, it is because your confederate is even more guilty than you. I cannot spare the one without letting the other go unpunished. To-morrow morning, before the household is up, you and everything belonging to you shall leave this house. If you ever set foot in Heathfield again it will be at your own peril. Go up to your

own room now and pack your boxes; I shall take the precaution of turning the key in your door to prevent your holding communication with any member of my household.'

'I give you my word, sir——' began Leah, turning visibly pale at the idea of finding herself a prisoner.

'Your word!' was the disdainful reply; and then he pointed to the door. 'Go at once!' But she still lingered. There was a spark of good even in this woman. She was unwilling to quit our presence without knowing what was to become of her mistress.

'You will not be hard on Miss Etta, sir? She has done wrong, but she is a poor creature, and——' But Mr. Hamilton walked to the door and threw it open with a gesture that compelled obedience.

The next moment, however, he recoiled with a low exclamation of horror; for there, drawn up against the wall, in a strange half-crouching attitude, as though petrified with terror, was his miserable cousin.

I heard Leah's shocked 'Miss Etta! How could you be so mad?' And then Mr. Hamilton put out his hand, as though to forbid approach; but with a cry of despair Miss Darrell seemed to sink to the ground, and held him convulsively round the knees, so that he could not free himself.

'Get up, Etta!' he said indignantly. 'It is not to me you have to kneel'; for he thought her attitude one of supplication. But I knew better. She had not strength to stand or support herself, and I passed behind him quickly and went to her help.

'You cannot speak to him like that, Miss Darrell. He will not hear you.' But, though Leah assisted me, we had some difficulty in inducing her to relax her frantic grip. And even when we placed her in a chair she seemed as though she would sink again on the ground. She was trembling all over, her teeth chattering; the muscles of her face worked convulsively.

'Giles, Giles,' she screamed, as he seemed about to leave her, 'you may kill me if you like, but you shall not look at me like this.' But, without vouchsafing her any answer, he turned to me.

'Will you wait with my cousin a moment? I will be back directly.' I nodded assent. I knew he wished to see Leah safely in her room, but as he closed the door Miss Darrell clutched my arm. She seemed really beside herself.

'Where has he gone? Will he fetch the police, Miss Garston? Will they put me in prison for it?'

'No,' I returned sternly. 'You know you are safe with him. He will not hurt a hair of your head, because you are a woman, and his own flesh and blood.'

'But he will banish me from his house!' she moaned. 'He will never forgive me or let me see his face again. He will tell —oh, I cannot bear it!'—her words strangled by a hoarse scream. 'I cannot and will not bear it.'

I put my hand on her shoulder. 'You must control yourself,' I said coldly. 'Would you wish Mr. Hamilton to treat you as a mad woman? Listen to me, Miss Darrell. One part of your secret is safe with me. Try and restrain yourself, and I will promise you that it shall never pass my lips.'

Even in her hysterical excitement she understood me, and a more human expression came into her hard, glaring eyes. 'Say it again; promise me,' she moaned. 'I hate you, but I know you are to be trusted.'

'If you behave yourself and try to control your feelings a little,' I returned slowly, 'I will say nothing about Uncle Max.' But at the name she covered her face with her hands and rocked herself in agony. In spite of all her sins I pitied her then.

At that moment Mr. Hamilton returned; but before he could speak I said quickly—

'Your cousin is not in a condition to listen to you to-night, and it is very late: I am going to take her up to her room and do what I can to help her. Will you allow us to go?'

He looked at her and then at me. His face was hard and sombre; there was no relenting there. 'Perhaps it will be better,' he returned slowly. 'Yes, you may go, but do not stay long with her. I may want to speak to you again.'

'Not to-night,' I remonstrated; for I could see he was oblivious of the time, and it was near midnight. 'To-morrow morning, as early as you like; but I cannot come down again.'

'Oh, I see,' the meaning of my words dawning upon him. 'To-morrow morning, then. Take her away now.' And, without another glance, he walked away to his study table.

'Come, Miss Darrell,' I whispered, touching her; and she rose reluctantly. 'Giles,—let me say one word to him,' said she, trying to follow him feebly, but I recalled her sternly and made her follow me. I had no fear of her now. Leah, whom I dreaded, was locked safely in her room, and this poor miserable woman was harmless enough.

She broke into hysterical sobs and moans when I got her

into her own room. I was afraid Gladys might hear her, and I insisted on her showing more self-control. My sharp words had their effect after a time, but it was impossible to induce her to undress or go to bed. She had flung herself across the foot and lay crouched up in a heap, with all the delicate embroidery of her French dressing-gown crushed under her. When she was quieter I put pillows under her head and covered her up warmly, and then sat down to watch her.

I was about to leave the room once to fetch something I wanted, when she suddenly struggled into a sitting posture, and begged me, in a voice of horror, not to leave her.

'Leah will murder me if you do!' she cried. 'She has frightened me often,—she says such things,—oh, you do not know! I should never have been so bad but for Leah!'

'I shall not be long; and Leah is locked in her room; Mr. Hamilton has the key,' I returned quietly. But it was with difficulty that she would let me go. I suppose even criminals feel the need of sympathy. Miss Darrell hated me in her heart, had always hated me, but the sight of even an unloved human face was better than solitude. No wonder with such thoughts people go mad sometimes.

I was surprised to see Mr. Hamilton walking up and down the long passage, as though he were keeping guard. He was going to let me pass him without a word, but I stopped and asked what he was doing.

'I was waiting until you were safe in your own room,' was the reply. 'What has kept you so long?'

'I must go back again,' I returned quickly; 'she is not fit to be left alone. I am not afraid of her now, Mr. Hamilton: she can do me no harm. Please do not watch any longer.'

'You were ill: have you forgotten that? I ought not to allow you to make yourself worse. Why,' with a sort of impatience visible in his manner, 'need you be troubled about our miserable affairs?'

'Let me go back for a little while,' I pleaded; for I knew if he ordered me into my own room I should be obliged to obey him. 'It keeps her in check, seeing me there: she is so exhausted that she must sleep soon; and then I will lie down.' I suppose he thought there was no help for it, for he drew back for me to pass; but I was grieved to hear his footsteps for a long time after that pacing slowly up and down, and it was more for his sake than my own that I was glad when Miss

Darrell's moans ceased, and the more quiet regular breathing proved to me that she was asleep.

The passage was empty when I came out, and the first faint streak of dawn was visible. It was too late then to think of going to bed. I lay down, dressed as I was, and slept for a couple of hours; then the sunshine woke me, and I got up and took my bath and felt refreshed.

Chatty brought me my tea early, and told me that Mr. Hamilton was walking in the garden. 'And do you know, ma'am,' observed the girl breathlessly, 'something strange must have happened since last evening; for when I looked out of my window before six this morning I saw master standing before the door, and there was Leah, in her bonnet, speaking to him, and she went off with Pierson, wheeling off her boxes on his truck. I do believe she has really gone, ma'am, and not a creature in the house knows it.'

'Never mind: it is not our business, Chatty; but I think I will go and speak to your master when I have finished my tea.'

'I was to give you a message, ma'am,—that he would be glad if you could join him in the garden as soon as you were up, as he had to go some distance, and he wanted to tell you about it.' I put down my cup at once when I heard this, and hurried out into the garden.

Mr. Hamilton was pacing up and down the asphalt walk as he had paced the passage last night. He did not quicken his steps when he saw me, but walked towards me slowly, with the gait of a man who has a load on his mind.

'I hardly expected you so early. Have you had any rest at all?' looking at me rather anxiously.

'Yes, thank you; I have slept for two hours. But you have not, Mr. Hamilton'; for he was looking wretchedly worn and ill.

'Was it likely that I could sleep?' he returned impatiently. 'But I have no time to waste. Atkinson will be round here directly with the dog-cart. I am going off to Liverpool by the 12.10 train.

'To Liverpool?' in unfeigned surprise.

'Yes; I have been thinking all night what is to be done about my unfortunate cousin. She is dependent on me, and I cannot send her away without finding her a home. That home,' pausing as though to give emphasis to his words, 'can never be under my roof again.'

'I suppose not.'

'The sin is of too black a dye for me to bring myself to forgive her. If I were to say that I forgive her I should lie.' And here his face became dark again. 'She has disgraced that poor boy Eric, and driven him away from his home; she has made Gladys's life wretched: her whole existence must have been a tissue of deceit and treachery. How could I sleep when I was trying to disentangle this mesh of deception and lies? how do I know when she has been true or when wholly false?'

'I fear there has been little truth spoken to you, Mr. Hamilton.' I was thinking of Gladys when I said that, but something in my words seemed to strike him.

'Is there anything else I ought to know? But no, I have no time for that: I must try and make some arrangements at once: she cannot break bread with us again. The people I want to find are old patients of mine. I was able to serve them once: I feel as though I have a claim on them.'

'But you will be back soon?' for I could not bear him to leave us alone.

'To-morrow morning. I will take the night train up, but I shall be detained in London. Take care of Gladys for me, Miss Garston. Do not tell her more than you think necessary. Do not let Etta see her, if you can help it; but I know you will act for the best.' Then, as he looked at me, his face softened for a moment. 'I wish I had not to leave you; but you could send for Mr. Cunliffe.'

'Oh, there will be no need for that,' I returned hastily, for the thought of the wretched woman upstairs would prevent me from sending for Uncle Max. 'Come back as quickly as you can, and I will do my best for Gladys.'

'I know it. I can trust you,' he replied, very gently. 'Take care of yourself also.' Then, as the wheels of the dog-cart sounded on the gravel, he held out his hand to me gravely, and then turned away. A moment afterwards I heard his voice speaking to Atkinson, and as I entered the shrubbery Pierson was fastening the gate after them.

CHAPTER XLV

'THIS HOME IS YOURS NO LONGER'

THERE are long gray days in every one's life.

I think that day was the longest that I ever spent: it seemed as though the morning would never merge into afternoon, or the afternoon into evening. Of the night I could not judge, for I slept as only weary youth can sleep.

Sheer humanity, the mere instinct of womankind, had obliged me to watch by Miss Darrell through the previous night: for some hours her hysterical state had bordered on frenzy. I knew sleep was the best restorative in such cases: she would wake quieter. There would be no actual need for my services, and unless she sent for me I thought it better to leave her alone: she was only suffering the penalty of her own sin, the shame of detected guilt. There was no sign of real penitence to give me hope for the future.

I found Gladys awake when I returned from the garden: in spite of my anxiety, it gave me intense pleasure to hear her greeting words.

'Oh, Ursula, come and kiss me; it is good morning indeed. I woke so happy; everything is so lovely,—the sunshine, and the birds, and the flowers!' And, with a smile, 'I wished somebody could have seen—"my thoughts of Max."' And then, still holding me fast, 'I do not forget my poor boy, in spite of my happiness, but something tells me that Eric will soon come back.'

'He might have been here now,' I grumbled, 'if you had allowed me to tell your brother'; for those few reproachful words haunted me.

'Yes, dear; I know I was wrong,' she answered, with sweet candour. 'Giles is so kind now that I cannot think why I was so reserved with him; but of course,' flushing a little, 'I was afraid of Etta.'

'I suppose that was the reason,' I returned, busying myself about the room; for I did not care to pursue the subject. Mr. Hamilton's few words had convinced me that he thought it would be wiser to leave Gladys in ignorance of what was going on until Miss Darrell was out of the house. She had borne so much, and was still weak and unfit for any great excitement. My great fear was lest Miss Darrell should force her way into Gladys's presence and disturb her by a scene; and this fear kept me anxious and uneasy all day.

Gladys was a trifle restless; she wanted a drive again, and when I made her brother's absence a pretext for refusing this, she pleaded for a stroll in the garden. It was with great difficulty that I at last induced her to remain quietly in her room. But when she saw that I was really serious she gave up her wishes very sweetly, and consoled herself by writing to Max, in answer to a letter that he had sent under cover to me.

It was nearly noon before Chatty brought me a message that Miss Darrell was just up and dressed, and wished to speak to me; and I went at once to her.

The usually luxurious room had an untidy and forlorn aspect. The crumpled Indian dressing-gown and the breakfast-tray littered the couch; ornaments, jewellery, and brushes strewed the dressing-table. Miss Darrell was sitting in an easy-chair by the open window. She did not move or glance as I entered in the full light. She looked pinched and old and plain. Her eyelids were swollen; her complexion had a yellowish whiteness; as I stood opposite to her, I could see gray hairs in the smooth dark head; before many years were over Miss Darrell would look an old woman. I could not help wondering, as I looked at her, how any one could have called her handsome.

'Chatty says Leah has gone,' she said, in a voice fretful with misery. 'I told her that that was too good news to be true. Is it true, Miss Garston?'

'Yes; she has gone.'

'I am glad of it,' with a vixenish sharpness that surprised me. 'I hated that woman, and yet I was afraid of her too: she got me in her toils, and then I was helpless. Where has Giles

gone, Miss Garston? Chatty said he went off in a dog-cart with his portmanteau.'

How I wished Chatty would hold her tongue sometimes! but most likely Miss Darrell had questioned her.

'Mr. Hamilton's business is not our affair,' I returned coldly.

'That means I am not to ask; but all the same you are in his secret,' with one of her old sneers. 'Will he be back to-night?'

'No, not to-night; to-morrow morning early.'

'That is all I want to know, Miss Garston,' hesitating a little nervously. 'I have never liked you, but all the same I have not injured you.'

'Have you not, Miss Darrell?'

'No,' very uneasily; but she did not meet my eyes. 'I defy you to prove that I have. Still, if I were your enemy, ought you not to heap coals of fire on my head?'

'Possibly.'

My coolness seemed to frighten her; she lost her sullen self-possession.

'Have you no heart?' she said passionately. 'Will you not hold up a finger to help me? You have influence with Giles; do not deny it. If you ask him to keep me here he will not refuse you, and you will make me your slave for life.'

I heard this proposition with disgust. She could cringe to me whom she hated. I shook my head, feeling unable to answer her.

'I could help you,' she persisted, fixing her miserable eyes on me. 'Oh, I know what you want: you cannot hide from me that you are unhappy. I know where the hindrance lies; one word from me would bring Giles to your feet. Am I to say that word?'

'No,' I returned indignantly. 'Do you think that I would owe anything to you? I would rather be unhappy all my life than be under such an obligation. You are powerless to harm me, Miss Darrell; your plots are nothing to me.'

'And yet a word from me would bring him to your feet.'

'I do not want him there,' I replied, irritated at this persistence. 'I do not wish you to mention his name to me; if you do so again I will leave you.'

'On your head be your own obstinacy,' she returned angrily; but I could see the despair in her eyes, and I answered that.

'Miss Darrell,' I went on, more gently, 'I cannot help you

in this. How could I ask Mr. Hamilton to keep you under his roof, knowing that you have poisoned his domestic happiness? Even if I could be so mad or foolish, would he be likely to listen to me?'

'He would listen to you,' half crying: 'you know he worships the ground you walk on.'

I tried to keep back the rebellious colour that rose to my face at her words.

'Do not cheat yourself with this insane belief,' I returned quietly. 'Mr. Hamilton is inexorable when he has decided on anything.'

'Inexorable! you may well say so!' rocking herself in an uncontrollable excitement. 'Giles is hard,—cruel in his wrath: he will send me away and never see me again.' And now the tears began to flow.

'Miss Darrell,' I continued pityingly, 'for your own sake listen to me a moment. You have failed most miserably in the past: let the future years be years of repentance and atonement. Mr. Hamilton will not forgive until you have proved yourself worthy of forgiveness: remember you owe the future to him.'

She stared at me for a moment as though my words held some hope for her; then she turned her back on me and went on rocking herself. 'Too late!' I heard her mutter: 'I cannot be good without him.' And, with a strange sinking of heart, I left the room.

She could bring him to my feet with a word. Was this the truth, or only an idle boast? No matter; I would not owe even his love to this woman. 'I can live without you, Giles,—my Giles,' I whispered; but hot tears burnt my cheeks as I spoke.

In the afternoon I saw Miss Darrell pacing up and down the asphalt walk. Gladys saw her too, and turned away from the window rather nervously. 'How restless Etta seems!' she said once; but I made no answer. Towards evening I heard her footsteps perambulating the long passage, and softly turned the key in the lock without Gladys noticing the movement. Gladys noticed very little in that sweet dreamy mood that had come to her; her own thoughts occupied her; her lover's letter had more than contented her.

About ten o'clock I went in search of Chatty, and came face to face with Miss Darrell. She was in her crumpled yellow

dressing-gown, and her dark hair hung over her shoulders; her eyes looked bright and strange. I moved back a step and laid my hand on the handle.

She greeted this action with a disagreeable laugh.

'I suppose you heard me trying the door just now. Yes, I wanted to see Gladys; I wished to make some one feel as wretched as I do myself; but you were too quick for me. Do you always keep your patients under lock and key?'

'Sometimes,' laconically, for I disliked her manner more than ever to-night: it was not the first time that I had fancied that she had had recourse to some form of narcotic. 'Why do you not go to bed, Miss Darrell?'

'Perhaps I shall when I have thoroughly tired myself. These passages have rather a ghastly look: they remind me of Leah, too,' with a shudder. 'Good-night, Miss Garston; pleasant dreams to you. I suppose you have not thought better of what I said about Giles?'

'No, certainly not,' retreating into my room and locking the door in a panic. I heard a husky laugh answer me. Perhaps last night's watching had tired my nerves, for it was long before I could compose myself to sleep.

The night passed quietly, and I woke, refreshed, to the sound of summer rain pattering on the shrubs. The little oak avenue looked wet and dreary; but no amount of rain or outward dreariness could damp me, with the expectation of Mr. Hamilton's return; and I helped Chatty arrange our rooms with great cheerfulness.

He came back earlier than I expected. I had hardly finished settling Gladys for the day,—she took great pains with her toilet now, and was hard to please in the matter of ruffles and ornaments,—when Chatty told me that he wished to speak to me a moment.

I made some excuse and joined him without delay. He looked much as he had the previous morning,—very worn and tired, and his eyes a little sunken; but he greeted me quietly, and even kindly; he asked me if I felt better, and how Gladys was. I was rather ashamed of my nervous manner of answering, but that odious speech of Miss Darrell would come into my mind when he looked at me.

'Chatty says my cousin is in the dining-room: do you mind coming down with me for a few minutes? I do not wish to see her alone.'

Of course I signified my willingness to accompany him, and he walked beside me silently to the dining-room door.

Miss Darrell was sitting on the circular seat looking out on the oak avenue; she did not turn her head, and there was something hopeless in the line of her stooping shoulders. I saw her hands clutch the cushions nervously as her cousin walked straight to the window.

'Etta,' he began abruptly, 'I wish you to listen to me a moment. I will spare you all I can, for Aunt Margaret's sake: I do not intend to be more hard with you than my duty demands.'

'Oh, Giles!' raising her eyes at this mild commencement; but they dropped again at the sight of the dark impenetrable face, which certainly had no look of pity on it. She must have felt then, what I should certainly have felt in her place, that any prayers or tears would be wasted on him.

'It would be useless, and worse than useless,' he went on, 'to point out to you the heinousness of your sin,—perhaps I should say crime. All these years you have not faltered in your relentless course; no pity for me and mine has touched your heart; you have allowed our poor lad to wander about the world as an outcast; you have suffered Gladys to carry a heavy and bitter weight in her bosom. Pshaw! why do I reiterate these things? you know them all.'

'Giles, I have loved you in spite of it all! Be merciful to me!' But he went on as though he heard her no more than the rain dripping on the leaves.

'This home is yours no longer; you are no fit companion for my sisters, even if I could bear to shelter a traitor under my roof. If I know my present feelings, I will never willingly see your face again: whether I ever do see it depends on your future conduct.'

'Oh, for pity's sake, Giles!' She was writhing now. In spite of all her sins against him, she had loved him in her perverse way.

'I have found you a home far from here,' he continued in the same chilling manner, 'and to-morrow morning you will be taken to it. The Alnwicks are kind, worthy people—not rich in this world's goods, or what the world would call refined. I was able to help them once when they were in bitter straits: in return they have acceded to my request and have offered you a home.'

'I will not go!' she sobbed passionately. 'I would rather you should kill me, Giles, than treat me with such cruelty!'

'They are old,' he went on calmly, 'but more with trouble than years, and they have no one belonging to them, and they promise to treat you like a daughter. You will be in comfort, but not luxury: luxury has been your curse, Etta. A moderate sum will be paid to you yearly for your dress and personal expenses, but if overdrawn or misapplied it will be curtailed or stopped altogether. Your maintenance will be arranged between the Alnwicks and myself, and, unless I give you permission to write,—which is distinctly not my purpose now,—no letter from you will be read or answered, and I forbid all such communication.'

'I cannot—I cannot bear it!' she screamed, springing to her feet; but he waved her back with such a look that her arms dropped to her side.

'No scene, I beg,' in a tone of disgust. 'Let me finish quietly what I have to say.—Miss Garston,' turning to me, 'could you spare Chatty to help my cousin pack her clothes and books? for we shall start early in the morning. Mr. Alnwick has promised to meet us half-way.'

'I can set Chatty at liberty for the day,' was my answer.

'Very well. Etta, you may as well go at once. Your meals will be served in your room. I do not wish you to resume your usual habits: this is my house, not yours. Your only course now must be obedience and submission. Let your future conduct atone to me for the past, that I may remember without shame that I have a cousin Etta.'

He turned away then, but I could see his face working. He had dearly loved this miserable creature, and had cared for her as though she had been his sister, and he could not leave her without this vague word of hope. Did she understand him, I wonder,—that in the future he might bring himself to forgive her? I heard her weeping bitterly in her room afterwards, and Chatty, in her fussy, good-natured way, trying to comfort her: the girl had a kind heart.

Early in the afternoon Mr. Hamilton joined us in the turret-room. Directly he came in and sat down by his sister's couch I knew that he meant to tell her everything,—that he thought it best that she should hear it from him.

He told it very quietly, without any explanation or expression of feeling; but it was not possible for Gladys to hear that

Eric's name was cleared without keen emotion. 'Oh, thank God for this other mercy!' she sobbed, bursting into tears; and presently, as he went on, she crept closer to him, and before he had finished she had clasped his arm with her two hands and her face was hidden in them.

'Oh, Giles! if you only knew what she has made me suffer!' she whispered. 'We should have understood each other better if Etta had not always come between us.'

'You are right; I feel you are right, Gladys,' stroking her fair hair as he spoke; then she looked up and smiled affectionately in his face.

'Ursula, will you leave me alone with my brother for a little? There is something I want to tell him!' And I went away at once.

As I opened the door, Chatty came down the passage with a pile of freshly-ironed linen. Her round face looked unusually disturbed.

'She is going on so, ma'am,' she whispered, 'it is dreadful to hear her. She is making us turn out all her drawers, and there are three big trunks to fill. She says she is going away for ever.'

'Hush!' I returned, with a warning look, for Miss Darrell was at the door watching us. She was in her yellow dressing-gown, and the old pinched look was still in her face.

'Why are you stopping to gossip, Chatty?' she said querulously. 'I shall not have finished until midnight at this rate. Leah would have packed by this time.' And Chatty, with rather a frightened look, carried in her pile of clean linen.

I strolled about the garden for an hour, and then went back to the house. Mr. Hamilton was just closing the door of his sister's room. He looked happier, I thought: the dark, irritable expression had left his face. He came forward with a smile.

'Gladys has been telling me, Miss Garston. I am more glad than I can say. Cunliffe is a fine fellow; there is no one that I should like so well for a brother.'

'I knew you would say so. Uncle Max is so good.'

'Well, he has secured a prize,' with a slight sigh. 'Gladys is a noble woman; she will make her husband a happy man. There is little doubt that Etta did mischief there; but Gladys was not willing to enter on that part of the subject. I begin to think,' with a quick, searching look that somewhat disturbed me, 'that we have not yet reached the limits of her mischief-making.'

I could have told him that I knew that. I think he meant to have said something more; but a slight movement in the direction of Miss Darrell's room made us separate somewhat quickly. I saw Mr. Hamilton glance uneasily at the half-closed door as he went past it.

I found Gladys in tears, but she made me understand with some difficulty that they were only tears of relief and joy.

'But I am sorry too, because I have so often grieved him so,' she said, drying her eyes. 'Oh, how good Giles is!—how noble!—and I have misunderstood him so! he was so glad about Max, and so very very kind. And then we talked about Eric. He says we were wrong to keep it from him, that even you were to blame in that. He thinks so highly of you, Ursula; but he said even good people make mistakes sometimes, and that this was a great mistake. I was so sorry when he said that, that I asked his pardon over and over again.'

I felt that I longed to ask his pardon too; and yet the fault had been Gladys's more than mine; but I knew she had talked enough, so I kissed her, and begged her to lie down and compose herself while I got the tea ready.

We did not see Mr. Hamilton again that night. Gladys and I sat by the open window, talking by snatches or relapsing into silence. When she had retired to rest I stole out into the passage to see what had become of tired Chatty, but I repented this charitable impulse when I saw Miss Darrell standing in the open doorway opposite, as though she were watching for some one.

On seeing me she beckoned imperiously, and I crossed the passage with some reluctance.

'Come in a moment: I want to speak to you,' she said hoarsely; and I saw she was much excited. 'I sent Chatty to bed. We have finished packing,—oh, quite finished. Giles will be satisfied with my obedience; and now I want you to tell me what you and he were saying about Mr. Cunliffe.' But her white lips looked whiter as she spoke.

'Excuse me, Miss Darrell,' I returned; but she stopped me.

'You are going to say that it is no business of mine. You are always cautious, Miss Garston; but I am resolved to know this, or I will refuse to leave the house to-morrow morning. Are they engaged? is that what Giles meant when he said he was a fine fellow?'

I thought it wiser to tell her the truth. 'They are engaged.'

'And Giles knows it, and gives his consent?'

'Most gladly and willingly.'

'I wish I could kill them both!' was the sullen reply; and then, without taking any further notice of me, she sat down on one of the boxes and hid her face in her hands, and when I tried to speak to her she shook her head with a gesture of impatience and despair.

'The game is played out; I may as well go,' she muttered; and seeing her in this mood I thought it better to leave her; but I slept uneasily, and often started up in bed fancying I heard something. I remembered her words with horror: the whole scene was like a nightmare to me,—the disordered and desolate room, with the great heavily-corded trunks, the dim light, the wretched woman in her yellow dressing-gown sitting crouched on a box. 'Can this be love?' I thought, with a shudder,—'this compound of vanity and selfishness?' and I felt how different was my feeling for Giles. The barrier might never be broken down between us, I might never be to him more than I was now, but all my life I should love and honour him as the noblest man I knew on God's earth.

CHAPTER XLVI

NAP BARKS IN THE STABLE-YARD

I WAS arranging some flowers that Max had sent us the next morning, and waiting for Gladys to join me, when Mr. Hamilton came in.

'Where is Gladys?' he asked, looking round the room; but when he heard that she had not finished dressing, he would not hear of my disturbing her.

'It is no matter,' he went on. 'I shall be back before she is in bed. I only wanted to tell her that I have seen Cunliffe. I breakfasted with him this morning. He will be up here presently to see her. He looks ten years younger, Miss Garston.' And, as I smiled at that, he continued, in rather a constrained voice,—

'Mr. Tudor breakfasted with us.'

'Yes, I suppose so,' I returned carelessly. 'What splendid carnations these are, Mr. Hamilton! You have not any so good at Gladwyn.'

'Cunliffe must spare me some cuttings,' he replied, rather absently; then, without looking at me, and in a peculiar voice, 'Is it still a secret, Miss Garston, or may I be allowed to congratulate you?'

I dropped the carnations as though they suddenly scorched me.

'Why should you congratulate me, Mr. Hamilton?'

'I thought you considered me a friend,' he replied, rather nervously. 'But, of course, if it be still a secret, I must beg your pardon for my abruptness.'

'I don't know what you mean,' I said, very crossly, but my cheeks were burning. 'If this be a joke, I must tell you once for all that I dislike this sort of jokes: they are not in good taste':

for I was as angry with him as possible, for who knew what nonsense he had got into his head? He looked at me in quite a bewildered fashion; my anger was evidently incomprehensible to him. We were playing at cross-purposes.

'Do you think I am in the mood for joking?' he said, at last. 'Have you ever heard me jest on such subjects, Miss Garston? I thought we agreed on that point.'

'Do you mean you are serious?'

'Perfectly serious.'

'Then in that case will you kindly explain to me why you think I am to be congratulated?'

He looked uncomfortable. 'I have understood that you and Mr. Tudor were engaged, or, at least, likely to become so. Do you mean,' as my astonished face seemed to open room for doubt, 'that it is not true?—that Etta deceived me there?'

'Miss Darrell!' scornfully; then, controlling my strong indignation with an effort, I said, more quietly, 'I think that we ought to beg Mr. Tudor's pardon for dragging in his name in this way: he would hardly thank us. If I am not mistaken, he is in love with my cousin Jocelyn.'

'Impossible! What a credulous fool I have been to believe her! Your cousin Jocelyn,—do you mean Miss Jill?'

'Yes,' I returned, smiling, for a sense of renewed happiness was stealing over me. 'The foolish fellow is always following me about to talk of her. I do believe he is honestly in love with her. He saved her life, and that makes it all the worse.'

'All the better, you mean,' regarding me gravely. That fixed, serious look made me rather confused.

'Would you mind telling me, Mr. Hamilton,' I interposed hurriedly, 'what put this absurd idea into your head?'

'It was Etta,' he returned, in a low voice. 'It was that night when you had been singing to us, and she came home unexpectedly.'

'Yes, yes, I remember'; but I could not meet his eyes.

'She told me when we got home that Mr. Tudor was in love with you, and that she believed you were engaged, or that, at least, there was an understanding between you; and she added that if I did not believe her I might watch for myself, and I should see that you were always together.'

'Well?' rather impatiently.

'I will beg your pardon afterwards for following Etta's advice, but I did watch, and it was not long before I came round to her opinion.'

'Mr. Hamilton!'

'Wait a moment before you get angry with me again. I never saw you in a passion before'; but I knew he was laughing at me. 'Etta was certainly right in one thing: I seemed always finding you together.'

'That was because I often met Mr. Tudor in the village, and he turned back and walked with me a little; but we always talked of Jill.'

'How could I know that?' in rather an injured voice. 'Were you talking of Miss Jocelyn in the vicarage kitchen-garden that evening?'

'Probably,' was my cool reply; for how could I remember all the subjects of our conversation?

'And when you went to Hyde Park Gate, you were together then,—Leah saw you,—and——' But I could bear no more.

'How could I know that I should be watched and spied upon, and all my innocent actions misrepresented?' I exclaimed indignantly. 'It was not fair, Mr. Hamilton. I could not have believed it of you, that you should listen to such things against me. That boy, too!'

'Nonsense!' speaking in his old good-humoured voice, and looking exceedingly pleased. 'He is five-and-twenty, and a very good-looking fellow: a girl might do worse for herself than marry Lawrence Tudor.'

'But I intend to have him as my cousin some day,' was my reply; but at this moment Chatty came in to tell Mr. Hamilton that the boxes were in the cart, and Miss Darrell waiting in the carriage.

'Confound it! I had forgotten all about Etta,' he returned impatiently. 'Well, it cannot be helped: we must finish our conversation this evening.' And with a smile that told of restored confidence he went off.

I sat down and cried a little for sheer happiness, for I knew the barrier was broken at last, and that we should soon arrive at a complete understanding. It was hard that he should have to leave me just then; and the thought of resuming the conversation in the evening made me naturally a little nervous. 'Supposing I go back to the White Cottage,' I thought once; but I knew he would follow me there, and that it would seem idle coquetting on my part. It would be more dignified to wait and hear what he had to say. I should go back to the White Cottage in a day or two.

Gladys came out of her room when she heard the wheels, and proposed that we should go down into the drawing-room. 'Poor poor Etta!' she sighed. 'I try to pity and be sorry for her, but it is impossible not to be glad that she has gone. I want to look at every room, Ursula, and to realise that I am to have my own lovely home in peace. We must send for Lady Betty; and Giles must know about Claude. I do not believe that he will be angry: oh no, nothing will make Giles angry now.'

Max found us very busy in the drawing-room. I was just carrying out a work-box and a novel that belonged to Miss Darrell, and Gladys had picked up a peacock-feather screen, and a carved ivory fan, and two or three little knick-knacks. 'Take them all away, Ursula dear,' she pleaded, with a faint shudder; but as she put them in my arms there were Max's eyes watching us from the threshold.

I saw her go up to him as simply as a child, and put her hands in his, and as I closed the door Max took her in his arms. The peacock screen fell at my feet, the ivory fan and a hideous little Chinese god rolled noisily on the oilcloth. I smiled as I picked them up. My dear Max and his Lady of Delight were together at last. I felt as though my cup of joy were full.

Max remained to luncheon, but he went away soon afterwards. Gladys must rest, and he would come again later in the evening. I was rather glad when he said this, for I wanted to go down to the White Cottage and see Mrs. Barton, and I could not have left the house while he was there. Yes, Max was certainly right: it would be better for him to come again when Mr. Hamilton was at home.

I made Gladys take possession of her favourite little couch in the drawing-room, but she detained me for some time talking about Max, until I refused to hear another word, and then I went up to my own room, and put on my hat.

I thought Nap would like a run down the road,—and I could always make Tinker keep the peace,—so I went into the stable-yard in search of him. He was evidently there, for I could hear him barking excitedly. The next moment a young workman came out of the empty coach-house, and walked quickly to the gate, followed closely by Nap, jumping and fawning on him.

'Down, down, good dog!' I heard him say, and then I whistled back Nap, who came reluctantly, and with some difficulty I contrived to shut him up in the stable-yard. There

seemed no man about the premises. Then I hurried down the road in the direction of the village: my heart was beating fast, my limbs trembled under me. I had caught sight of a perfect profile and a golden-brown moustache as the young workman went out of the gate, and I knew it was the face of Eric Hamilton.

My one thought was that I must follow him, that on no account must I lose sight of him. As I closed the gate I could see him in the distance, just turning the corner by the Man and Plough; he was walking very quickly in the direction of the station. I quickened my steps, breaking into a run now and then, and soon had the satisfaction of lessening the distance between us; my last run had brought me within a hundred yards of him, and I slackened my pace, and began to look the matter in the face.

I remembered that the London train would be due in another quarter of an hour; no doubt that was why he was walking so fast. I must keep near him when he took his ticket. I had no fear of his recognising me; he had only seen me twice, without my bonnet, and now I wore a hat that shaded my face, and my plain gray gown was sufficiently unlike the dress I had worn at Hyde Park Gate. I had a sudden qualm as the thought darted into my mind that he might possibly have a return-ticket; but I should know if he got into the Victoria train, and I determined on taking a ticket for myself.

I had a couple of sovereigns and a little loose silver in my purse. I had assured myself of this fact as I walked down the hill. As soon as the young workman had entered the booking-office, I followed him closely, and to my great relief heard him ask for a third-class ticket for Victoria. When he had made way for me I took the same for myself, and then, as I had seven minutes to spare, I went into the telegraph-office and dashed off a message to Gladys.

'Called to town on important business; may be detained to-night. Will write if necessary.'

As I gave in the form I could hear the signal for the up train, and had only time to reach the platform when the Victoria train came in.

The young workman got into an empty compartment, and I followed and placed myself at the other end. I had no wish to attract his notice; the ill success of my former attempt had frightened me, and I felt I dared not address him, for fear he should leave the train at the next station. Some workmen had

got in and were talking noisily among themselves. I did not feel that the opportunity would be propitious.

When we had actually left Heathfield I stole a glance at the young man: he had drawn his cap over his eyes, and seemed to feign sleep, no doubt to avoid conversation with the noisy crew opposite us; but that he was not really asleep was evident from the slight twitching of the mouth and a long-drawn sigh that every now and then escaped him.

I could watch him safely now, and for a few minutes I studied almost painfully one of the most perfect faces I had ever seen. It was thin and colourless, and there were lines sad to see on so young a face; but it might have been a youthful Apollo leaning his head against the wooden wainscotting.

Once he opened his eyes and pushed back his cap with a gesture of weariness and impatience. He did not see me: those sad, blue-gray eyes were fixed on the moving landscape; but how like Gladys's they looked! I turned aside quickly to hide my emotion. I thought of Gladys and Mr. Hamilton, and a prayer rose to my lips that for their sake I might succeed in bringing the lost one back.

The journey seemed a long one. All sorts of fears tormented me. I remembered Mr. Hamilton was in London: there was danger of encountering him at Victoria. It was five now: he might possibly return to dinner. I could scarcely breathe as this new terror presented itself to me, for if Eric caught sight of his brother all would be lost.

When the train stopped, I followed the young workman as closely as possible. As we were turning in the subterranean passage for the District Railway, my heart seemed to stop. There was Mr. Hamilton reading his paper under the clock: we actually passed within twenty yards of him, and he did not raise his eyes. I am sure Eric saw him, for he suddenly dived into the passage, and I had much trouble to keep him in sight: as it was, I was only just in time to hear him ask for a third-class single to Bishop's Road.

I did not dare enter the same compartment, but I got into the next, and now and then, when our train stopped at the different stations, I could hear him distinctly talking to a fellow-workman, in a refined, gentlemanly voice, that would have attracted attention to him anywhere. Once the other man called him Jack, and asked where he hung out, and I noticed this question was cleverly eluded, but I heard him say

afterwards that he was in regular work, and liked his present governor, and that the old woman who looked after him was a tidy, decent lady, and kept things comfortable. My thoughts strayed a little after this. The sight of Mr. Hamilton had disturbed me. What would he think when Gladys showed him my telegram? He had promised to finish our conversation this evening. I felt with a strange soreness of longing that I should not see Gladwyn that night. My absence of mind nearly cost me dear, for I had no idea that we had reached Bishop's Road until Eric passed my window, and with a smothered exclamation I opened the door: happily, the passengers were numerous and blocked up the stairs, so I reached the street to find him only a few yards before me.

My patience was being severely exercised after this, for Eric did not go straight to his lodgings. He went into a butcher's first, and after a few minutes' delay—for there were customers in the shop—came out with a newspaper parcel in his hand. Then he went into a grocer's, and through the window I could see him putting little packets of tea and sugar in his pocket.

His next business was to the baker's, and here a three-cornered crusty loaf was the result. The poor young fellow was evidently providing his evening meal, and the sight of these homely delicacies reminded me that I was tired and hungry and that a cup of tea would be refreshing. Eric carried his steak and three-cornered loaf jauntily, and every now and then broke into a sweet low whistle that reminded me of his nickname among his mates of 'Jack the Whistler.'

We were threading the labyrinth of streets that lie behind Bishop's Road Station; I was beginning to feel weary and discouraged, when Eric stopped suddenly before a neat-looking house of two stories, with very bright geraniums in the parlour window, and taking out his latch-key let himself in, and closed the door with a bang.

I stalked carelessly to the end of the street, and read the name. 'No. 25 Madison Street,' I said to myself, and then I went up to the door and knocked boldly. My time had come now, I thought, trying to pull myself together, for I felt decidedly nervous.

A stout, oldish woman with rather a pleasant face opened the door; her arms were bare, and she dried her hands on her apron as she asked me my business.

'Your lodger Jack Poynter has just come in,' I said quietly. 'I have a message for him. Can I see him, please?'

'Oh ay,—you can see him surely.' And she stepped back into the passage and called out, 'Jack, Jack! here is a young woman wants to speak to you.' But I shut the door hurriedly and interrupted her:

'Let me go up to his room: you can tell me where it is'; for it never would do to speak to him in the passage.

'Well, perhaps he may be washing and brushing himself a bit after his journey,' she returned good-humouredly: 'he is a tidy chap, is Jack. If you go up to the top landing and knock at the second door, that is his sitting-room; he sleeps at the back, and Sawyer has the other room.'

I followed these instructions, and knocked at the front-room door; but no voice bade me come in; only a short bark and a scuffle of feet gave me notice of the occupant: so I ventured to go in.

It was a tidy little room, and had a snug aspect. A white fox-terrier with a pretty face retreated growling under a chair, but I coaxed her to come out. The steak and the loaf were on the table. But I had no time for any further observation, for a voice said, 'What are you barking at, Jenny?' and the next moment Eric entered the room.

He started when he saw me caressing the dog.

'I beg your pardon for this intrusion,' I began nervously, for I saw I was not recognised; 'but I have followed you from Heathfield to tell you the good news. Mr. Hamilton, it is all found out; Miss Darrell stole that cheque.'

I had blurted it out, fearing that he might start away from me even then: he must know that his name was cleared, and then I could persuade him to listen to me. I was right in my surmise, for as I said his name he put his hand on the door, but my next words made him drop the handle.

'What?' he exclaimed, turning deadly pale, and I could see how his lips quivered under his moustache. 'Say that again: I do not understand.'

'Mr. Hamilton,' I repeated slowly, 'you need not have rushed past your poor brother in that way at Victoria, for he is breaking his heart, and so is Gladys, with the longing to find you. Your name is cleared: they only want to ask your forgiveness for all you have suffered. It was a foul conspiracy of two women to save themselves by ruining you. Leah has made full confession. Your cousin Etta took the cheque out of your brother's desk.'

'Oh, my God!' he gasped, and, sitting down, he hid his face in his hands. The little fox-terrier jumped on his knee and began licking his hands. 'Don't, Jenny: let me be,' he said, in a fretful, boyish voice that made me smile. 'I must think, for my brain seems dizzy.'

I left him quiet for a few minutes, and Jenny, after this rebuke, curled herself up at his feet and went to sleep. Then I took the chair beside him, and asked him, very quietly, if he could listen to me. He was frightfully pale, and his features were working, but he nodded assent and held his head between his hands again, but I know he heard every word.

I told him as briefly as I could how Gladys had languished and pined all these years, how she had clung to the notion of his innocence and would not believe that he was dead. He started at that, and asked what I meant. Had Giles really believed he was dead?

'He had reason to fear so,' I returned gravely; and I told him how his watch and scarf had been found on the beach at Brighton, and how the hotel-keeper had brought them to Mr. Hamilton.

He seemed shocked at this. 'I had been bathing,' he said, in rather an ashamed voice: 'some boy must have stolen them, and then dropped his booty for fear of the police. I missed them when I came out of the water, and I hunted about for them a long time. As I was leaving the beach I saw one of Giles's friends coming down towards me, and I got it into my head that I was recognised. I dared not go back to the hotel. Besides, my money was running short. I took a third-class ticket up to London, and on my way fell in with a house-painter, who gave me lodging for a few nights.'

'Yes, and then——' for he hesitated here.

'Well, you see, I was just mad with them at home. I thought I could never forgive Giles that last insult. My character and honour were gone. Etta had been my secret enemy all along, because she knew I read her truly. Leah had given in her false evidence. My word was nothing. I was looked upon as a common thief. I swore that I would never cross the threshold of Gladwyn again until my name was cleared. They should not hear of me; if they thought me dead, so much the better!'

'Oh, Mr. Eric, and you never considered how Gladys would suffer!'

'Yes, that was my only trouble; but I thought they would

turn her against me in time. I was nearly mad, I tell you: but for Phil Power I believe I should have been desperate; but he stuck to me, and was always telling me that a man can live down anything. Indeed, but for Phil and his pretty little wife I should have starved, for I had no notion of helping myself, and would not have begged for a job to save my life, for I could not forget I was a gentleman. But Phil got me work at his governor's. So I turned house-painter, and rather liked my employment. I used to tell myself that it was better than old Armstrong's office. Why, I make two pounds a week now when we are in full work,' finished the poor lad proudly.

My heart was yearning over him, he was so boyish and weak and impulsive; but I would not spare him. I told him that it was cowardly of him to hide himself,—that it would have been braver and nobler to have lived his life openly. 'Why not have let your brother know what you were doing?' I continued. 'For years this shadow has been over his home. He has believed you dead. He has even feared self-destruction. This fear has embittered his life and made him a hard, unhappy man.'

'Do you mean Giles has suffered like that?' he exclaimed; and his gray eyes grew misty.

'Yes, in spite of all your sins against him, he has loved you dearly; and Gladys——' But he put up his hand, as though he could hear no more.

'Yes, I know, poor darling; but I have often seen her, often been near her; but I heard her laugh, and thought she was happy and had forgotten me. How long is it since Leah confessed, Miss—Miss——' And here he laughed a little nervously. 'I do not know who you are, and yet you must be a friend.'

'I am Ursula Garston, a very close friend of your sister Gladys, and I have been nursing her in this last illness.'

'What! has she been ill?' he asked anxiously. And when I had given him full particulars he questioned me again about Leah's confession, and I had to repeat all I could remember of her words.

'Then I was not cleared when you spoke to me at Hyde Park Gate?' he returned, with a relieved air. 'So it did not matter my giving you the slip. You frightened me horribly, Miss Garston, I can tell you that. I saw those advertisements, too, to Jack Poynter, and I was very near leaving the country; but I am glad I held on, as Phil advised,' drawing a long breath as he spoke.

CHAPTER XLVII

'AT LAST, URSULA, AT LAST!'

We were interrupted at this moment by the landlady's voice calling to Eric from the bottom of the stairs.

'Jack,—I say, Jack, what has become of the steak I promised to cook for you? I'll be bound Jenny has eaten it.'

Eric gave a short laugh and went out into the passage, and I heard him say, in rather a low voice,—

'A lady, a friend of my sister's, has just brought me some news. I expect she is as tired and hungry as I am. Do you think,' coaxingly, 'that you could get tea for us in the parlour, Mrs. Hunter? and perhaps you will join us there'; for class-instinct had awoke in Eric at the sight of a lady's face, and I suppose, in spite of my Quakerish gray gown, I was still young enough to make him hesitate about entertaining me in his bachelor's room.

There was a short parley after this. Then Mrs. Hunter came up panting, and, still wiping her hands from imaginary soap-suds, carried off the steak and the three-cornered loaf. 'It will be ready in about twenty minutes, Jack,' she observed, with a good-natured nod.

Eric employed the interval of waiting by questioning me eagerly about his sisters. Then he tried to find out, in a gentlemanly way, how I contrived to be so mixed up with his family. This led to a brief *résumé* of my own history and work, and by the time Mrs. Hunter called us I felt as though I had known Eric for years.

Mrs. Hunter beamed on us as we entered. There was really quite a tempting little meal spread on the round table, though

the butter was not fresh nor the forks silver, but the tea was hot and strong, and the bread was new. And Eric produced from his stores some lump sugar and a pot of strawberry jam, and I did full justice to the homely fare.

When Mrs. Hunter went into the kitchen to replenish the teapot I took the opportunity of consulting Eric about a lodging for the night. It was too late to return to Heathfield. Besides, I had made up my mind that Eric should accompany me. Aunt Philippa and Jill were in Switzerland, and the house at Hyde Park Gate would be empty. I could not well go to an hotel without any luggage. Eric seemed rather perplexed, and said we must take Mrs. Hunter into our confidence, which we did, and the good woman soon relieved our minds.

She said at once that she knew an excellent person who let lodgings round the corner,—a Miss Moseley. Miss Gunter, who had been a music-mistress until she married the young chemist, had lived with her for six years; and Miss Crabbe, who was in the millinery department at Howell's, the big shop in Kimber Street, was still there. Miss Gunter's room was vacant, and she was sure Miss Moseley would take me in for the night and make me comfortable.

I begged Mrs. Hunter to open negotiations with this obliging person, and she pulled down her sleeves at once, and tied her double chin in a very big black bonnet. While she was gone on this charitable errand, Eric and I sat by the parlour window in the gathering dusk, and I told him about Gladys's engagement to Uncle Max.

He seemed much excited by the news. 'I always thought that would be a case,' he exclaimed: 'I could see Mr. Cunliffe cared for her even then. Well, he is a first-rate fellow, and I am awfully glad.' And then he fell into a reverie, and I could see there were tears in his eyes.

Mrs. Hunter returned presently with the welcome news that Miss Moseley was airing my sheets at the kitchen fire, and, after a little more talk, Eric walked with me to Prescott Street and gave me in charge to Miss Moseley, after promising to be with me soon after nine the next morning.

I found Miss Moseley a cheerful talkative person, with very few teeth and a great deal of good-nature. She gave me Miss Gunter's history as she made the bed. I could see that her marriage with the young chemist was a great source of glorification to all connected with her. She was still holding forth

on the newly-furnished drawing-room, with its blue sofa and inlaid chiffonier, as she lighted a pair of candles in the brass candlesticks, and brought me a can of hot water. I am afraid I was rather thankful when she closed the door and left me alone, for I was tired, and longed to think over the wonderful events of the day. I slept very sweetly in the old-fashioned brown bed that was sacred to the memory of Miss Gunter, and woke happily to the fact that another blue day was shining, and that in a few hours Eric and I would be at Heathfield. I ate my frugal breakfast in a small back parlour overlooking the blank wall of a brewery, and before I had finished there was a quick tap at the door, and Eric entered. A boyish blush crossed his handsome face as I looked at him in some surprise. He had laid aside his workman's dress, and wore the ordinary garb of a gentleman. Perhaps his coat was a little shabby and the hat he held in his hand had lost its gloss, but no one would have noticed such trifles with that bright speaking face and air of refinement; and, though he looked down at his uncovered hands and muttered something about stopping to buy a pair of gloves, I hastened to assure him that it was so early that it did not matter. 'I should hardly have recognised you, Mr. Eric,' I ventured to observe, for I saw he was a little sensitive about his appearance; and then he told me in his frank way that the clothes he wore were the same in which he left Gladwyn nearly four years ago.

'They have been lying by all this time,' he went on, 'and they are sadly creased, I am afraid. I have grown a little broader, and they don't seem to fit me, somehow, but I did not want Gladys to see me in anything else.'

We had decided to take the ten o'clock train to Heathfield, so I did not keep him long waiting for me. On our way to the station we met a house-painter: he looked rather dubiously at Eric.

'All right, Phil,' he laughed, 'I am going home; but I shall turn up again all right: this lady has brought me good news.' And he wrung Phil's hand with a heartiness that spoke volumes.

He was very excited and talkative at first, but as soon as we left Victoria behind us he became quieter, and soon afterwards perfectly silent; and I did not disturb him. He grew more nervous as we approached Heathfield, and when the train stopped he had not an atom of colour in his face.

'I do not know what I shall say to Giles,' he said, as we walked up the hill. 'It will be very awkward for both of us, Miss Garston. Of course I know that——'

But I begged him not to anticipate the awkwardness. 'You will be welcomed as we only welcome our dearest and best,' I assured him. 'Your brother's heart has been sore for you all these years: you need not fear one word of reproach from him.' But he only sighed, and asked me not to walk so quickly; his courage was failing; I could see the look of nervous fear on his face.

We had arranged that he should accompany me to Gladwyn. Gladys never left her room before twelve, and I thought that I could shut him safely in the dining-room while I prepared her for his arrival. I knew Mr. Hamilton was never at home at this hour, but I had not reckoned on the disorganised state of the house, or the difference my brief absence would make in the usual routine.

I blamed myself for rashness and want of consideration when, on opening the gate, I saw Gladys crossing one of the little lawns around the house, with Max and Mr. Hamilton. At my faint exclamation Eric let go the gate rather too suddenly, and it swung back on its hinges so noisily that they all looked round, and the poor boy stood as though rooted to the spot. But the next moment there was the gleam of a white gown, and Gladys came running over the grass towards us with outstretched hands, and in another second the brother and sister were locked in each other's arms.

'Oh, my darling,' we heard her say, as she put up her face and kissed him, and then her fair head seemed to droop lower and lower until it touched Eric's shoulder. I glanced anxiously at Mr. Hamilton.

'Take her into the house, Eric,' he said, in his ordinary voice; but how white his face looked! 'It has been too sudden, and she has fainted.' And, without a word, Eric lifted her in his strong arms and carried her of his own accord to the little blue couch in the drawing-room, and then stood aside while his brother administered the usual remedy. Not a look had passed between them yet: they were both too much absorbed in Gladys.

She soon opened her eyes, and pushed away the vinaigrette I was holding to her.

'It is nothing, Ursula. I am well, quite well. Where is

my dear boy? Do not keep him from me.' And then Eric knelt down beside her, and put his arm round her with a sort of sob.

'I ought not to have startled you so, Gladys. I have made you look so pale.' But she laughed again, and pushed back his hair from his forehead, and feasted her eyes on his face as though they could never be satisfied.

'Eric, darling, it seems like a dream; and it was Ursula, dear good Ursula, who has given you back to us. We must thank her presently; but not now. Oh, I must look at you first. He looks older, does he not, Giles?—older and more manly. And what broad shoulders, and such a moustache!' but Eric silenced her with a kiss.

'That will do, Gladys dear,' he whispered, springing to his feet; and then, with downcast eyes and a flush on his face, he held out his hand to his brother. It was taken and held silently, and then Mr. Hamilton's disengaged hand was laid on his shoulder caressingly.

'Welcome home, my dear boy,' he said; but his voice was not quite so clear as usual.

'I am very sorry, Giles,' he faltered; but Mr. Hamilton would not let him speak.

'There is nothing to be sorry for, now,' he said significantly. 'Have you shaken hands with Mr. Cunliffe, Eric? Gladys, can you spare your boy for a few moments while I carry him off?' And, as Gladys smiled assent, Mr. Hamilton signed to Eric to follow him.

Max sat down beside Gladys when they had left the room, and Gladys made a space for me on the couch.

'You must tell us how it happened,' she said, fixing her lovely eyes on me. 'Dear Ursula, we owe this fresh happiness to you: how can I thank you for all your goodness to us?' But I would not allow her to talk in this fashion, and I left Max to soothe her when she cried a little, and then I told them both how I had found Eric in the stable-yard with Nap, and how I had tracked him successfully to his lodgings.

'She is a brave, dear child, is she not, Gladys?' observed Max. Then, with a mischievous look in his brown eyes, 'You are proud of your presumptive niece, are you not, dear?' And then, in spite of Gladys's confusion, for she was still a little shy with him, I burst out laughing, and she was obliged to join me, for it had never entered into our heads that Gladys would be

my aunt. The laugh brought back her colour and did her good; but she would not look at Max for a long time after that, though he was on his best behaviour and said all sorts of nice things to us both.

It was a long time before Mr. Hamilton brought Eric back to us. They both looked very happy, but Eric's eyes had a strangely softened look in them. The gong sounded for luncheon just then, and Mr. Hamilton asked me, in rather a surprised tone, why I had not taken off my hat and jacket, so I ran off to my room in a great hurry. As he opened the door for me, he said, in rather an odd tone, 'Do you know you have not wished me good-morning, Miss Garston?' I muttered some sort of an answer, but he merely smiled, and told me not to keep them waiting. Gladys came in to luncheon, and took her usual place; but neither she nor Eric made much pretence of eating, though Mr. Hamilton scolded them both for their want of appetite. Nobody talked much, and there was no connected conversation: I think we were all too much engrossed in watching Gladys. Max was in the background for once, but he did not seem to think of himself at all: the sight of Gladys's sweet face, radiant with joy, was sufficient pleasure for him; but now and then she turned to him in a touching manner, as though to show she had not forgotten him, and then he was never slow to respond.

When luncheon was over, Mr. Hamilton begged me to take Gladys to the turret-room and persuade her to lie down.

'I am going to send Cunliffe away until dinner-time,' he said, with a sort of good-natured peremptoriness: 'under the circumstances he is decidedly *de trop*. Yes, my dear, yes,' as Gladys looked pleadingly at him, 'Eric shall come and talk to you. I am not so unreasonable as that.' And I think we all understood the feeling that made Gladys put her arms round her brother's neck, though we none of us heard her whisper a word. Max consented very cheerfully to efface himself for the remainder of the afternoon, and Gladys accompanied me upstairs. I waited until Eric joined us, and then I left them together.

'Oh, Gladys, he was so good, and I did not deserve it!' he burst out before I had closed the door. 'I never knew Giles could be like that.' But I took care not to hear any more. I hardly knew what to do with myself that afternoon, but I made up my mind at last that I would finish a letter I had begun to

Jill. The inkstand was in the turret-room, but I thought I would fetch one out of the drawing-room; but when I reached the head of the staircase I drew back involuntarily, for Mr. Hamilton was standing at the bottom of the stairs, leaning against the wall with folded arms, as though he were waiting for somebody or something. An unaccountable timidity made me hesitate; in another second I should have gone back into my room, but he looked up, and, as before, our eyes met.

'Come,' he said, holding out his hand, and there was a sort of impatience in his manner. 'How long are you going to keep me waiting, Ursula?' And I went down demurely and silently, but I took no notice of his outstretched hands.

I was trying to pass him in a quiet, ordinary fashion, as though there were no unusual meaning in his deep-set eyes; but he stopped me somewhat coolly by taking me in his arms.

'At last, Ursula, at last!' was all he said, and then he kissed me. . . .

I remember I told Giles, when I had recovered myself a little, that he had taken things too much for granted.

He had brought me into the drawing-room, and was sitting beside me on the little couch. To my dazzled eyes the room seemed full of sunshine and the sweet perfume of flowers: to this day the scent of heliotrope brings back the memory of that afternoon when Giles first told me that he loved me. He seemed rather perplexed at first by my stammering little speech, and then I suppose my meaning dawned on him, for his arm pressed me more closely.

'I think I understand: you mean, do you not, Ursula, that I have not asked you in plain English to be my wife? I thought we understood each other too well for any such word to be necessary. Ever since you told me that fellow Tudor was nothing to you, I felt you belonged to me.'

'I do not see that,' I returned shyly, for Giles in his new character was rather formidable. He had taken such complete possession of me, and, as I had hinted, had taken everything for granted. 'Because Mr. Tudor was simply a friend, it did not follow that I cared for any one else.'

'Yes; but you do care for me a good deal, darling, do you not?' in a most persuasive voice. 'But, for my own comfort, I want you to tell me if you are quite content to accept such a crabbed old bachelor for your husband.'

It was a little difficult to answer, but I made him understand that I looked upon him in a very different light, and I think I managed to content him.

'And you are really happy, dear?'

'Yes, very happy'; but the tears were in my eyes as I answered. He seemed distressed to see them, and wanted me to tell him the reason; but I think he understood me thoroughly when I whispered how glad Charlie would have been. I asked him presently how long he had cared for me, but, to my surprise, he declared that he hardly knew himself: he had been interested in me from the first hour of our meeting, but it was when he heard me sing in Phœbe Locke's room that the thought came to him that he must try and win me for his wife.

I think it was in answer to this that I said some foolish word about my want of beauty. I was a little sensitive on the subject, but, to my dismay, Giles's face darkened, and he dropped my hand.

'Never say that to me again, if you love me, Ursula,' he said, in such a grieved voice that I could hardly bear to hear it. 'Do you think I would have married you if you had been handsome? Do you know what you are talking about, child? Has no one told you about Ella?'

'Oh yes,' I returned, terrified at his sternness, for he had never spoken to me in such a tone before. 'Yes, indeed, and I know she was very beautiful.'

'She was perfectly lovely,'—in the same hard voice. Oh, how he must have suffered, my poor Giles! 'And the memory of that false loveliness has made me loathe the idea of beauty ever since. No, I would never have let myself love you if you had been handsome, Ursula.'

'I am glad I am not,' I returned, in a choked voice, for all this was very painful to me. Something in my tone attracted his notice, for he stooped and looked in my face, and his manner instantly changed.

'Oh, you foolish child,' very caressingly, 'there are actually tears in your eyes! You are not afraid of me, Ursula? I am always excited when I speak of Ella: she very nearly destroyed my faith in women.'

'I cannot bear to think how you suffered,' I faltered, but he would not let me finish.

'Never mind; you have been my healer; you have always rested me so. Never call yourself plain again in my hearing.

No other face could be half so dear to me.' And then, with his old smile, 'Do you know, dear, when I saw you in that velvet gown at your cousin's wedding you looked so handsome that I went home in a bad humour, and then Etta told me about Tudor. Well, I have you safe now.' But I will not transcribe all Giles's speech; it was so lover-like, it made me understand, once for all, what I was to him, and how little he cared for life unless I shared it with him.

By and by he went on to speak of our mutual work, and here again he more than contented me.

'I do not mean to rob the poor people of their nurse, Ursula,' he said presently. 'When you come to Gladwyn as its mistress, I hope we shall work together as we do now.'

I told him I hoped so too; that I never wished to lay down my work.

'You are quite right, dear,' he answered cheerfully. 'We will not be selfish in our happiness. True, your work must be in limits. When I come home I shall want to see my wife's face. No,' rather jealously, 'I could not spare you of an evening, and in the morning there will be household duties. You must not undertake too much, Ursula.'

I told Giles, rather demurely, that there was plenty of time for the consideration of this point. He was inclined to bridge over the present in a man's usual fashion, but my new position was too overwhelming for me to look beyond the deep abiding consciousness that Giles loved me and looked to me for happiness.

So I turned a deaf ear when he asked me presently if I should mind Lady Betty sharing our home; 'for,' he went on, 'the poor child has no other home, and she is so feather-headed that no sensible man will think of marrying her.' It was not my place to enlighten Giles about Claude, but I thought it very improbable that Lady Betty would be long at Gladwyn; but I was a little oppressed by this sort of talk, and yet unwilling that he should notice my shyness, so I took the opportunity of saying it was tea-time, and did he not think that Gladys and Eric had been talking long enough?

He seemed unwilling to let me go, but I pleaded my nurse's duties, and then he told me, laughing, that I was a wilful woman, and that I might send Eric to him. As it happened, Eric was coming in search of Giles, and I found him in the passage.

Gladys was lying on her couch, looking worn out with happi-

ness. She was beginning to speak about Eric, when something in my face seemed to distract her. She watched me closely for a moment, then threw her arms round me and drew my head on her shoulder.

'Is it so, Ursula? Oh, my dear dear sister! I am so glad!' And she seemed to understand without a word when my over-excited feelings found vent in a flood of nervous tears, for she only kissed me quietly, and stroked my hair, until I was relieved and happy again.

'Dear Ursula,' she whispered, 'how can I help being glad, for Giles's sake?'

'And not for mine?' drying my eyes, and feeling very much ashamed of myself.

'Ah, you will see how good Giles will be,' was her reply to this. 'You will be a happy woman, Ursula. You are exactly suited to each other.' And I knew she was right.

Max's turn came presently.

I was sitting alone in the drawing-room before dinner. Giles had brought me some flowers, and had rushed off to dress himself; and I was looking out on the garden and the strip of blue sky, and buried in a happy reverie, when two hands suddenly lifted me up, and a brown beard brushed my face.

'Little she-bear, do you know how glad I am!' Max joyously exclaimed. And indeed he looked very glad.

CHAPTER XLVIII

'WHAT O' THE WAY TO THE END?'

Two days afterwards I went back to the White Cottage and took up my old life again,—my old life, but how different now!

I shall never forget how Phœbe welcomed me back, and how she and Susan rejoiced when I told them the news. Strange to say, neither of them seemed much surprised. They had expected it, Susan said, in rather an amused tone, for it was easy to see the doctor had thought there was no one like me, and was always hinting as much to them. 'Why, I have seen him watch you as though there were nothing else worth looking at,' finished Susan, with simple shrewdness.

I kept my own counsel with regard to Aunt Philippa and Jill, for I had made up my mind to go up to Hyde Park Gate as soon as they had returned, and tell them myself. But I wrote to Lesbia, with strong injunctions of secrecy.

The answer came by return of post.

It was a most loving, unselfish little letter, and touched me greatly.

'I shall be your bridesmaid, Ursula,' it said, 'whether you ask me or not. Nothing will keep me away that day. I shall love to be there for dear Charlie's sake.

'The news has made me so happy. Mother scolded me when she found me crying over your letter, but she cried herself too. We both agreed that no one deserved happiness more. I am longing to see your Mr. Hamilton, Ursie dear. He has one great virtue in my eyes already, that he appreciates you,' and so on, in Lesbia's gentle, sisterly way.

The fact of our engagement made a great sensation in the

place. People who had hitherto ignored the village nurse came to call on me. I suppose curiosity to see Mr. Hamilton's *fiancée* brought a good many of them.

My new position was not without its difficulties. Giles, who was impatient and domineering by nature, chafed much against the restraints imposed upon him by my loneliness.

His brief calls did not suffice him. I would not let him come often or stay long. Max asked us to the vicarage sometimes, and now and then Gladys or Lady Betty would call for me and carry me off to Gladwyn for the evening; and of course I saw Giles frequently when he visited his patients, but with his dislike to conventionality it was rather difficult to keep him in good-humour. He could not be made to see why I should not marry him at once and put an end to this awkward state of things.

We had our first lovers' quarrel on this point,—our first and our last,—for I never had to complain of my dear Giles again.

I think hearing about Lady Betty's long engagement with Claude Hamilton had made him very sore. He had been bitterly angry both with poor little Lady Betty and also with Gladys. He declared the secrecy had hurt him more than anything; but Eric acted as peacemaker, and he was soon induced to condone his sisters' trangression.

He came down to talk over the matter with me, and to tell me of the arrangements he had made for them.

It seemed that a letter from Claude had arrived that very mail, telling Giles of his promotion, and asking leave to come and fetch his dear little Lady Betty. It was an honest, manly letter, Giles said; and as Claude was in a better position, and Lady Betty had five thousand pounds of her own, there seemed no reason against their marrying.

He had talked to both Max and Gladys, and they were willing that Claude and Lady Betty should be married at the same time. The New Year had been already fixed for Gladys's, and Max meant to get leave of absence for two or three months and take her to Algiers; and as Claude would have to start for India early in March, Giles thought the double wedding would be best. They could get their *trousseaux* together, and the fuss would be got over more easily.

I expressed myself as charmed with all these arrangements, for I thought it would be very dull for Lady Betty to be left behind at Gladwyn; and then I asked Giles what he had settled about Eric.

He told me that Eric was still undecided, but he rather thought of going to Cirencester to enter the agricultural college there.

'You see, Ursula,' he went on, 'the lad is a bit restless. He has given up his absurd idea of becoming an artist,—I never did believe in those daubs of his,—but he feels he can never settle down to city life. He is very much improved, far more manly and sensible than I ever hoped to see him; but he is of different calibre from myself.'

'Do you think farming will suit him?' I asked anxiously.

'Better than anything else, I should say,' was the reply. 'Eric is an active, capable fellow, and he was always fond of out-door pursuits. He is young enough to learn. I have promised to keep Dorlicote Farm in my own hands until he is ready to take it. It is only ten miles from here, and has a very good house attached to it, and Eric will find himself in clover.' Then, as though some other thought were uppermost in his mind, he continued, 'I am so glad that you and he are such friends, Ursula, for he will often take up his quarters at Gladwyn.'

It was after this that Giles asked me to marry him at once. He was strangely unreasonable that morning, and very much bent on having his own way. My objections were overruled one by one; he absolutely refused to listen to my arguments when I tried to show him how much wiser it would be to have his sisters and Eric settled before he brought me home as mistress to Gladwyn.

It was the first time our wills had clashed; and, though I knew that I was right and that he was wholly in the wrong, it was very painful for me to refuse his loving importunities and to turn a deaf ear when he told me how he was longing for his wife; but I held firmly to my two points, that I would settle nothing without Aunt Philippa's advice, and that I would not marry him until Easter.

I told him so very gently, but Giles was not quite like himself that day. Lady Betty's secrecy was still rankling in his mind, and he certainly used his power over me to make me very unhappy, for he accused me of coldness and over-prudence, and reproached me with my want of confidence in his judgment. My pride took fire at last, and rose in arms against his tyranny.

'You must listen to me, Giles,' I returned, trying to keep down a choking feeling. 'You are not quite just to me to-day, but you do not mean what you say. You will be sorry afterwards

for your words. If I do not accede to your wishes, it is not because I do not love you well enough to marry you to-morrow, if it were expedient to do so; but under the circumstances it will be wiser to wait. I will marry you at Easter, If Uncle Max comes back by that time, for neither you nor I would like any one else to perform the ceremony. Will you not be content with this?'

'No,' he returned gloomily. 'You are keeping me waiting for a mere scruple: neither Gladys nor Lady Betty would say a dissenting word if I brought you to Gladwyn at once. You are disappointing me very much, Ursula. I could not have believed that my wishes were so little to you.' But he was not able to finish this cutting speech, for I could bear no more, and suddenly burst into such an agony of tears that Giles was quite frightened.

I found out then the goodness of his heart and his deep unselfish affection for me. He reproached himself bitterly for causing me such pain, begged my pardon a dozen times for his ill temper, and so coaxed and petted me that I could not refuse to be comforted.

He laughed and kissed me when I implored him to take back his words about my coldness.

'My darling!—as though I meant it!' he said; but he had the grace to look very much ashamed of himself. 'Of course you were right,—you always are, Ursula: we will wait until Easter if you think it best. Miss Prudence shall have her own way in the matter; but I will not wait a day longer for all the Uncle Maxes in the world.' And so we settled it.

I remember how I tried to make up to Giles for his disappointment, and to show him how much I cared for him. We were dining at the vicarage that evening with Gladys and Eric, and as he walked home with me in the moonlight he took me to task very gently for being too good to him.

'You have been like a little angel this evening, Ursula, and I have not deserved it. I believe I love you far more for not giving me my own way. It was pure selfishness: I see it now.'

'I hope it is the last time that your will will not be mine,' I answered, rather sadly. 'If you knew what it cost me to refuse you, Giles!' But one of his rare smiles answered me.

It was the end of September when I went up to Hyde Park Gate to tell my wonderful piece of news to Aunt Philippa and

Jill. Jill was very naughty at first, and declared that she should forbid the banns; her dear Ursula should not marry that ugly man. But she changed her opinion after a long conversation with Giles, and then her enthusiasm knew no bounds. It was amusing to see the admiring awe with which Aunt Philippa looked at me. My engagement had raised her opinion of me a hundredfold. I was no longer the plain eccentric Ursula in her eyes: the future Mrs. Hamilton was a person of far greater consequence.

I could see that her surprise could scarcely be concealed. I used to notice her eyes fixed on me sometimes in a wondering way. She told Lesbia that she could hardly understand such brilliant prospects for dear Ursula. I had not Sara's good looks; and yet I was marrying a far richer man than Colonel Ferguson.

'I think Mr. Hamilton a very distinguished man, my dear,' she continued, much to Lesbia's amusement. 'He is peculiar-looking, certainly, and a little too dark for my taste; but his manners are charming, and he is certainly very much in love with Ursula. She looks very nice, and is very much improved; but still, one hardly expected such a match for her.'

Lesbia retailed this little speech with much gusto. Dear Aunt Philippa! she certainly did her duty by me then: nothing could exceed her kindness and motherliness. And Sara came very often, looking the prettiest and happiest young matron in the world, and almost overwhelmed me with advice and petting.

They had come to the conclusion that my position was a somewhat awkward one, and that it would not do for me to go on living at the White Cottage. They wanted me to give up my work at Heathfield until after my marriage; and at last Aunt Philippa conceived the brilliant idea of taking a house at Brighton for the winter.

'You have never liked Hyde Park Gate, Ursula,' she said, very kindly; 'and we shall all be glad to escape London fogs this year: your uncle will not mind the expense, and I think the plan will suit admirably. Heathfield is only twenty minutes from Brighton, and Mr. Hamilton will be able to visit you far more comfortably, and you can sleep a night or two at Sara's when you want to go up to London to get your *trousseau*.'

I thanked Aunt Philippa warmly for her kind thought, and

then I wrote to Giles, and asked his opinion. I found that he entirely agreed with Aunt Philippa.

'I think it an excellent plan, dear,' he wrote; 'and you must thank your good aunt for her consideration for us both. I shall see you far oftener at Brighton than at the White Cottage. Miss Prudence will be less active there: I shall be allowed to enjoy a reasonable conversation without the speech—"Oh, do please go away now, Giles; you have been here nearly an hour"—that invariably closed our cottage interviews.' I could see Giles was really pleased with Aunt Philippa's proposition, so I promised to go back to Heathfield and settle my affairs, and join them directly the house in Brunswick Place was ready; and by the middle of October we were all settled comfortably for the winter.

I found Giles was right. I saw him oftener, and there was less restraint on our intercourse. He would come over to luncheon whenever he had a leisure day, and take me for a walk, or drop in to dinner and take the last train back. Gladys and Lady Betty came over perpetually. I used to help them with their shopping, and often go back with them for a few hours. Max was also a frequent visitor, and Mr. Tudor. Aunt Philippa kept open house, and made all my visitors welcome. I think she was a little sorry that Mr. Tudor came so perseveringly: but she was true to her principles to let things take their course and not to fan the flame by opposition. She was always kind to the young man, and though she generally contrived to keep Jill beside her when he dropped in for afternoon tea or encountered them on the parade, she did it so quietly that no one noticed any significance in the action.

But I think Aunt Philippa's maternal fears would have been up in arms if she had overheard a conversation between Jill and myself one wintry afternoon.

Aunt Philippa had gone up to town to see Sara, who was a little ailing, and she and Uncle Brian were to return later. Gladys and Giles were to dine with us, and Max would probably join them. Aunt Philippa was very fond of these impromptu entertainments, but she had not extended the invitation to Mr. Tudor, who had called the previous day, and I had got it into my head that Jill was a little disappointed.

She sat rather soberly by the fire that afternoon; but when Miss Gillespie left us she took her usual seat on the rug, and

her black locks bobbed into my lap as usual, but I thought the firelight played on a very serious face.

'What makes you so silent this afternoon, Jill?' I asked, rather curiously; but she did not answer for a moment, only drew down my hand, and looked at the diamonds that were flashing in the ruddy blaze,—Giles's pledge that he had placed there; then she laid her cheek against them, and said suddenly—

'I was only thinking, Ursie dear: I often think about things. Do you remember that evening at Hyde Park Gate when the lamp fell on me, and I might have been burnt to death?'

'Oh yes, Jill,' with a shudder, for I never cared to recall that scene.

'Well, I was thinking,' still dreamily. Then, with a change of manner that startled me, 'Ursie, if a person saves another person's life, don't you think that life ought to belong to them? —that is, if they wish it?' with a sudden blush that rather alarmed me.

'Stop, my dear,' I returned coolly. 'This is very vague. I do not think I quite understand. A person and another person, and them, too: it is terribly involved. Which is which? as the children say.'

Jill gave a nervous little laugh, but her eyes gave me no doubt of her meaning: they looked strangely dark and soft.

'Mr. Tudor saved my life,' she whispered. 'Ursie, if he wants it, that life ought to belong to him.'

'Jill, my dear,' for I was thoroughly startled now. Things were growing serious; but Jill gave me a little push in her childish way.

'Ursie, don't pretend to look so surprised: you knew all about it: I saw it in your face. Don't you remember what he said that night, that he did not know what would become of him if I died, that he could not bear it? Did you see how he looked when he said it?'

I remained silent, for I could not deny that Mr. Tudor had betrayed himself at that moment; but she went on very quietly, 'Ursie dear, I know Mr. Tudor cares for me; he does not always hide it, though he tries to do so. You see he is so real and honest that he cannot help showing things.'

'Jill,' I exclaimed anxiously, 'what would your mother say if she knew this?'

'I think she does know it,' replied Jill calmly. 'She does

not care for Mr. Tudor to come so often, but she is good to him all the same. Neither father nor mother will be pleased about it, because he is not rich, poor fellow; not that I think that matters,' finished Jill, in a grave, old-fashioned manner.

'My dear child,' in a horrified tone, 'you talk as though you were sure of your own mind, and you are hardly seventeen.'

'So I am sure,' was the confused answer. 'If Mr. Tudor cares enough for me to wait for a good many years,—until I am one-and-twenty,—he will find me all ready: of course I belong to him, Ursula: has he not saved my life? There is no hurry,' went on Jill, in her matter-of-fact way; 'he is very nice, and I shall always like him better than any one else; but I should not care to be engaged until I am one-and-twenty. One wants a little fun and a good deal of work before settling down into an engaged person,' finished the girl, with a droll little laugh.

I was spared the necessity of any reply to this surprising confession by the entrance of our three visitors, for Max had encountered them at the station, of course by accident, and had walked up with them. That fact was sufficient to account for Gladys's soft bloom and the satisfied look in her eyes: she looked so lovely in the new furs Giles had bought her, that I did not wonder that Max was a little absent in his replies to me. Jill had made some excuse and left us, and it was really a very good idea of Giles's to ask me to come out on the balcony and look at the sea. He wrapped me in his plaid and placed me in a sheltered corner, and we stood watching the twinkling lights, and the dark water under the glimmer of starlight. He had a great deal to tell me, first how happy Eric was in his new work, and what cheerful letters he wrote to Gladys, and next about Captain Hamilton, with whom he professed himself much pleased.

'Lady Betty is just as much a child as ever. It is ridiculous to think of her as a married woman,' he went on; 'but Claude declares himself to be perfectly satisfied. Well, there is no accounting for tastes,' with a change of intonation that was very intelligible.

'And how is Phœbe, Giles?'

'Oh, first-rate,' he answered cheerfully; 'she likes her new couch much better than the bed. I tell her if she goes on improving like this we shall have her in the next room before Easter. By the bye, Ursula, have you digested the contents of my last letter? Shall we go to the Pyrenees to spend our

honeymoon? It will be too early for Switzerland: we might go later on, or to the Italian lakes.'

'Anywhere with you, Giles,' I whispered; and he gave me silent thanks for that pretty speech.

He did not say any more for a little time, and I stood by him watching the dark, wintry sea. Once my life had been dark and wintry too, but how mercifully I had been drawn out of the deep waters and brought to this dear haven of rest! As I crept nearer to Giles he seemed to utter my unspoken thought.

'I am very happy to-night, Ursula, I have been thinking as I travelled down what it will be to me to have you always near me, to share my work and life. I am so glad you love Gladwyn so dearly.'

'Love Gladwyn,—your home, Giles: is there anything strange in that?'

'No, dear, perhaps not; but I like to hear you say so. There will not be a wish of yours ungratified if I can help it. I mean to spoil you dreadfully, Ursula.'

I told him, smiling, that I was not afraid of this threat, and just then Max's voice interrupted us:

'Little she-bear, do you know this is dreadfully imprudent? Is this the way Hamilton means to take care of you?'

'Wait a moment, Ursula,' whispered Giles. 'Do you hear that ballad-singer in the square?' A voice clear and shrill seemed to float to us in the darkness: 'Sweet and low, sweet and low, wind of the western sea,' she sang. The waves seemed to splash in harmonious accompaniment; the lights were flickering, the carriages rolling under the faint starlight. I saw Giles's face—as I loved to see it—grave, thoughtful, and satisfied.

'After all,' he said, as though answering some inward questioning, 'a man cannot know what his life will bring him. Do you remember what Robert Browning says:

"What o' the way to the end?—The end crowns all."

The end crowns all to me, Ursula.' And Giles's deep-set eyes gave me no doubt of his meaning.

THE END

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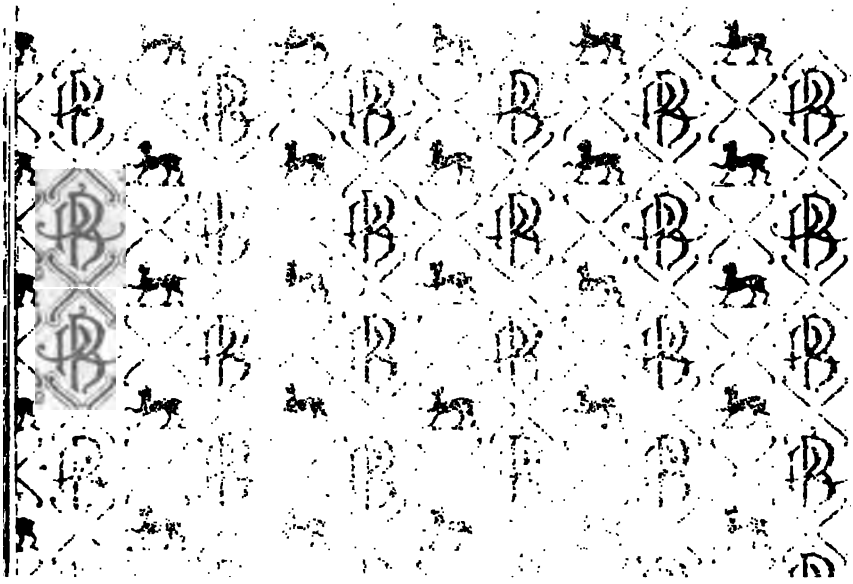

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